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AUGUST
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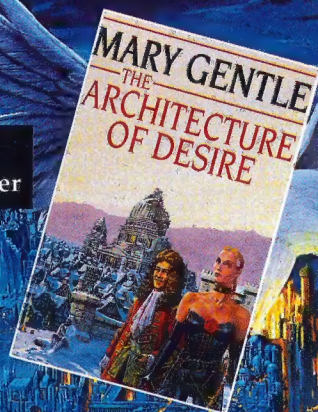
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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

No 50

August 1991

CONTENTS

Fiction

| | |
|---|----|
| Greg Egan: Appropriate Love | 6 |
| Diane Mapes: Remnants | 14 |
| Nicola Griffith: Wearing My Skin | 20 |
| Ian Lee: Pigs, Mostly | 34 |
| Stephen Baxter: The Baryonic Lords (2) | 43 |

Features

| | |
|---|----|
| Interface: Editorial & News | 4 |
| Interaction: Readers' Letters | 4 |
| Rachel Pollack: Interview by Colin Greenland | 17 |
| Nick Lowe, Wendy Bradley: Film & TV Reviews | 30 |
| Stephen Baxter: Interview by Colin Munro | 40 |
| John Clute, Mary Gentle, etc.: Book Reviews | 64 |

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Interface

David Pringle

This is our 50th number but we're not celebrating the fact in any particular way (other than by running an index of our first 50 issues). Having produced one or two "special issues" quite recently, we're saving any major celebrations for *Interzone's* tenth anniversary in March 1992 — perhaps we'll do something different then. Which is not to say that this is just an average issue: it contains the conclusion of **Stephen Baxter's** memorable short novel "The Baryonic Lords," plus excellent new stories by *IZ* favourites **Greg Egan**, **Nicola Griffith** and **Ian Lee**, and new American writer **Diane Mapes**.

Incidentally, if readers should have noticed a different "look" to the last issue and this one — and perhaps a slightly greater than usual number of misprints — the reason is that we are experimenting with changing our method of typesetting and production in preparation for a complete redesign of the magazine. There have been certain teething problems with the new system, for which we apologize to all readers — but we hope that the results, which may take effect from issue 52 onwards, will make up for these temporary glitches.

Interzone wins European Award

This magazine was the pleased recipient of the Eurocon Award for best science-fiction magazine at the pan-European sf convention held in Cracow, Poland, in May 1991. The award was one of a number bestowed by a Eurocon panel of experts which consisted of two delegates from each of the participating countries. Shortlisted for the magazine award were sf periodicals from Poland, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Romania and the Soviet Union, among other nations. We won! The award was accepted on our behalf by **Bridget Wilkinson**, one of the few British attendees, and we're very grateful to her as well as to the members of the judging panel. It's a considerable honour.

Other Eurocon Award winners were **Stanislaw Lem** (Poland) as best writer, **Kaja Saudek** (Czechoslovakia) as best artist, **Kees van Toorn** (Netherlands) as best promoter of sf, and **Unwin Hyman**

(Deceased) as best book publisher. **Eric Brown** also won a special commendation as best new British. The writer. 1992 Eurocon is due to be held in Zagreb, Yugoslavia (political upheavals permitting); and the 1993 Eurocon will take place in Jersey (combined with Helicon, the British Easter SF Convention).

Oh, and I suppose I ought to mention here that *Interzone* has been shortlisted once more for the **Hugo Award** as best "semi-professional magazine," the result to be decided at this year's World SF Convention in Chicago in August 1991. It is (I think) the sixth time that we've been nominated for this particular award; we're pleased, as ever, although we know that the winner is likely to be the US news magazine *Locus*, as ever...

And talking of Europe, **Malcolm Edwards** informs us that the Dutch edition of **Greg Bear's** novel *Queen of Angels* is entitled *Interzone: 2047*. Obviously, the name is becoming synonymous with science fiction for some people.

New British SF Anthologies

The first issue of **David Garnett's** original anthology *New Worlds* (i.e. *Zenith* by another name) should be out in September from Gollancz as a large-format paperback. We've been given an advance glimpse of the contents, and they are as follows: "Immaculata" by Storm Constantine, "Any Major Dude" by Paul Di Filippo, "Heat" by J. D. Gresham, "Floating Dogs" by Ian McDonald, "Ubermensch" by Kim Newman, "Indeterminacy" by Jay Summers, "Colour" by Michael Moorcock, "The Descent of Man" by Matthew Dickens, "Something Sweet" by Simon Ings & Charles Stross, and "FOAM" by Brian Aldiss. There's also an introduction by Moorcock and articles by John Clute and David Garnett. Sound good.

Paul McAuley and **Kim Newman** have got together to edit an original anthology of 'fantastic stories about aspects of rock music and popular culture. Provisionally entitled *In Dreams*, this too will be published by Gollancz, in 1992. It's likely to contain work by M. John Harrison, Richard Kadrey, Marc Laidlaw, Ian R.

MacLeod, Lewis Shiner, Don Webb and many others. And no, it won't contain reprints of the editors' own *Interzone* stories about Robert Johnson and Buddy Holly!

(David Pringle)

Interaction

Dear Editors:

I feel I must write to congratulate you on issue 46 of *Interzone*. Although *IZ* is a consistently good read this issue was excellent. The features were very good, and very interesting. And the stories were fantastic. "Crossroads" was a great alternate reality story; one of the few that I've read where the central character ends up in "our" reality and it seems a sensible conclusion to the story. The standard of the story was so high that you didn't expect it to have the alternate reality ending, so it was a surprise to see the customary ending used.

"La Macchina" was another story which had a standard idea, machines as part of society, and their circuits fusing to create "consciousness." However yet again the author manages to "pull it off" just through a high standard of writing.

"Storm Surge," another quality story. Not such a conventional idea this time, the writer however kept up the high standard shown so far.

Now we come to two very unconventional ideas, both extremely well executed. "Relocation" and "Shallow Grave" were both fantastic, really, really good. The issue was perfectly finished with the Elric story. I have intended for quite some time to get round to collecting Michael Moorcock's books as I have always enjoyed what few I've found in the library. This story has most certainly rekindled my interest.

Overall this was definitely the best issue of *Interzone* I've ever read, and I've subscribed for two years now. Congratulations, I think you peaked a couple of issues too early if you want American subscribers.

Nicholas P. Drage
Rushden, Northants

Dear Editors:

Oh dear. I'm sorry. I really am. But it's gotta be said:-

I once read the following by the legendary Arthur C. Clarke on the back of a collection of British short stories: "I am glad to see that science fiction is alive and

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well in the country of its origin."

Very nice of him, that. However, if the comparison between *IZ* 47 and *IZ* 48 is anything to go by, what he should have said was, "I am sad to see that science fiction is alive and well in the country of its origin — BECAUSE IT'S PUTTING AMERICAN SF IN THE SHADE!"

Yeah, well. Perhaps just a teeny bit exaggerated, but there was a bloody big difference in quality between *IZ's* *Aboriginal* contribution and *Aboriginal's* *IZ* contribution!

Before I continue, let me make it perfectly clear that I am not particularly patriotic. Being British does not make me biased towards British writing — if *IZ* 48 had been worse than 47 I would say so. But the fact is it wasn't. Nothing like.

Mr Ryan's editorial was promising enough — he is obviously proud of his magazine (a good sign), and it is commendable that, like *Interzone's* personnel, he welcomes submissions from unknown authors. As for what followed...

"The Cry of a Seagull" was touching and quite well written, but the ending was perhaps a little OTT.

Carol Hoyer's artwork was nice (and full-colour/full-page illustrations are something it would be good to one day see in *IZ*, but NOT to the detriment of anything else, including black and white illustrations — when you get the money, lads and lasses, add more pages for 'em), but I'm not sure what the planets had to do with the story. Symbolism, perhaps?

I didn't know what to make of "Like a Flithiss from Its Shell." Alien stories told from the alien's viewpoint can be pretty effective, but for God's sake, a reader needs something to RELATE to, or else he/she doesn't get involved. And I didn't.

"Amerikano Hiaika" was probably the strongest story in the issue. Great idea, great execution. Great.

Larry Blamire's painting was good, if a little old-fashioned and melodramatic.

David Cherry's artwork could have been better considering the story it represented.

"Aborigines" was okay, but I much prefer *IZ's* method of placing all this info. At the end of the relevant sections.

I liked "Reason is a Reptile." Doesn't anyone send good poetry to *IZ*? Or do you simply not publish it?

Most of "Through the Lens" seemed a waste of space. I don't see the point of printing every TV/movie titbit connected to sf. I want to know mainly about a film's content, not what it cost; or how much its writer, Suchandsuch, is suing its director, Thingumbibob, for; or when filming may start on an — as yet — un-named sequel with a debatable cast. "Mutant Popcorn" and "Tubecorn" are much more interesting.

I liked "A Message from our Alien Publisher." Has he met Nick Lowe, by any chance?

I also like the idea — or what I see as the idea — behind "What If." It is something I think *IZ* should perhaps copy (though on a bi-monthly basis). These "factoids" are surely a great source of story ideas.

Darrell Schweitzer's book reviews were good, but not a patch on John Clute, or any other of the regular reviewers. And I hate it when writers say "My readers." We're not YOUR readers, we're just READERS.

"Darkness on the Face of the Deep" ended well below expectations — it turned out to be little more than an Indiana Jones adventure story. I have only read one book by Harlan Ellison (*Shatterday*, a short-story collection), and I remember enjoying that. This wasn't up to much, though.

Paul Chadwick's painting was very good, as was Bob Eggleton's on the next

page.

"Targets" was a bit rough, and the idea nothing really new, but I enjoyed it all the way to the beginning of the last page — then onwards the author may just as well have written, "Oh I don't want to do this anymore, I'm bored." and gone off to be a lumberjack.

"From the Bookshelf": perhaps a little better than Schweitzer.

"The Matter of Beaupré" was good and funny, almost on par with "Amerikano Hiaika," and the accompanying artwork by Robert Pasternak was superb.

I won't extend this already overlong letter by telling you everything I thought of *IZ* 48. You know how good you are. But I must say some things:-

All the stories were excellent ("The Infinite Assassin," "The Nilakantha Scream" and "Song of Bullfrogs, Cry of Geese" especially so); Bruce Sterling's comment didn't 'arf make me feel proud to read sf; I liked the Wingrove interview, though disagreeing with most of what he said (I won't say what — it would warrant another letter); and the reviews — both celluloid and print — were up to, perhaps beyond, their usual high standard.

Overall, the swap was an excellent idea, especially if it gets such wonderful material printed.

Question: why isn't every *IZ* as good as *IZ* 48?

C. S. Barlow
Leigh, Lancs.

Dear Editors:

In memoriam

It is with profound regret and deepest sympathy that one receives news of the premature expiry of the *enfant terrible* Cyberpunk (*Interzone* 48). It seems that scarcely had the young pretender raised

Continued on page 19



APPROPRIATE LOVE

Greg Egan

“Your husband is going to survive. There’s no question about it.”

I closed my eyes for a moment and almost screamed with relief. At some point during the last thirty-nine sleepless hours, the uncertainty had become far worse than the fear, and I’d almost succeeded in convincing myself that when the surgeons had said it was touch-and-go, they’d meant there was no hope at all.

“However, he *is* going to need a new body. I don’t expect you want to hear another detailed account of his injuries, but there are too many organs damaged, too severely, for individual transplants or repairs to be a viable solution.”

I nodded. I was beginning to like this Mr Allenby, despite the resentment I’d felt when he’d introduced himself; at least he looked me squarely in the eye and made clear, direct statements. Everyone else who’d spoken to me since I’d stepped inside the hospital had hedged their bets; one specialist had handed me a Trauma Analysis Expert System’s printout, with one-hundred-and-thirty-two “prognostic scenarios” and their respective probabilities.

A new body. That didn’t frighten me at all. It sounded so clean, so simple. Individual transplants would have meant cutting Chris open, again and again — each time risking complications, each time subjecting him to a form of assault, however beneficial the intent. For the first few hours, a part of me had clung to the absurd hope that the whole thing had been a mistake; that Chris

had walked away from the train wreck, unscratched; that it was someone else in the operating theatre — some thief who had stolen his wallet. After forcing myself to abandon this ludicrous fantasy and accept the truth — that he had been injured, mutilated, almost to the point of death — the prospect of a new body, pristine and whole, seemed an almost equally miraculous reprieve.

Allenby went on. “Your policy covers that side of things completely; the technicians, the surrogate, the handlers.”

I nodded again, hoping that he wouldn’t insist on going into all the details. I *knew* all the details. They’d grow a clone of Chris, intervening *in utero* to prevent its brain from developing the capacity to do anything more than sustain life. Once born, the clone would be forced to a premature, but healthy, maturity, by means of a sequence of elaborate biochemical lies, simulating the effects of normal ageing and exercise at a sub-cellular level. Yes, I still had misgivings — about hiring a woman’s body, about creating a brain-damaged “child” — but we’d agonized about these issues when we’d decided to include the expensive technique in our insurance policies. Now was *not* the time to have second thoughts.

“The new body won’t be ready for almost two years. In the mean time, the crucial thing, obviously, is to keep your husband’s brain alive. Now, there’s no prospect of him regaining consciousness in his present situation, so there’s no

compelling reason to try to maintain his other organs."

That jolted me at first — but then I thought: *Why not?* Why not cut Chris free from the wreck of his body, the way he'd been cut free from the wreck of the train? I'd seen the aftermath of the crash replayed on the waiting room TV: rescue workers slicing away at the metal with their clean blue lasers, surgical and precise. Why not complete the act of liberation? *He* was his brain — not his crushed limbs, his shattered bones, his bruised and bleeding organs. What better way could there be for him to await the restoration of health, than in a perfect, dreamless sleep, with no risk of pain, unencumbered by the remnants of a body that would ultimately be discarded?

"I should remind you that your policy specifies that the least costly medically sanctioned option will be used for life support while the new body is being grown."

I almost started to contradict him, but then I remembered: it was the only way that we'd been able to shoe-horn the premiums into our budget; the base rate for body replacements was so high that we'd had to compromise on the frills. At the time, Chris had joked, "I just hope they don't get cryonic storage working in our lifetimes. I don't much fancy you grinning up at me from the freezer, every day for two years."

"You're saying you want me to keep nothing but his brain alive — *because that's the cheapest method?*"

Allenby frowned sympathetically. "I know, it's unpleasant having to think about costs, at a time like this. But I stress that the clause refers to *medically sanctioned* procedures. We certainly wouldn't insist that you do anything unsafe."

I nearly said, angrily: you won't *insist* that I do *anything*. I didn't, though; I didn't have the energy to make a scene — and it would have been a hollow boast. In theory, the decision would be mine alone. In practice, Global Assurance were paying the bills. They couldn't dictate treatment, directly — but if I couldn't raise the money to bridge the gap, I knew I had no choice but to go along with whatever arrangements they were willing to fund.

I said, "You'll have to give me some time, to talk to the doctors, to think things over."

"Yes, of course. Absolutely. I should explain, though, that of all the various options —"

I put up a hand to silence him. "*Please*. Do we have to go into this right now? I told you, I *need* to talk to the doctors. I need to get some sleep. I know: eventually, I'm going to have to come to terms with all the details... the different life support companies, the different services they offer, the different kinds of machines... whatever. But it can wait for twelve hours, can't it? *Please*."

It wasn't just that I was desperately tired, probably still in shock — and beginning to suspect that I was being railroaded into some off-the-shelf "package solution" that Allenby had already costed down to the last cent. There was a

woman in a white coat standing nearby, glancing our way surreptitiously every few seconds, as if waiting for the conversation to end. I hadn't seen her before, but that didn't prove that she wasn't part of the team looking after Chris; they'd sent me six different doctors already. If she had news, I wanted to hear it.

Allenby said, "I'm sorry, but if you could just bear with me for a few more minutes, I really do need to explain something."

His tone was apologetic, but tenacious. I didn't feel tenacious at all; I felt as if I'd been struck all over with a rubber mallet. I didn't trust myself to keep arguing without losing control — and anyway, it seemed like letting him say his piece would be the fastest way to get rid of him. If he snowed me under with details that I wasn't ready to take in, then I'd just switch off, and make him repeat it all later.

I said, "Go on."

"Of all the various options, the least costly doesn't involve a life support *machine* at all. There's a technique called biological life support that's recently been perfected in Europe. Over a two-year period, it's more economical than other methods by a factor of about twenty. What's more, the risk profile is extremely favourable."

"Biological life support? I've never even heard of it."

"Well, yes, it is quite new, but I assure you, it's down to a fine art."

"Yes, but *what is it?* What does it actually entail?"

"The brain is kept alive by sharing a second party's blood supply."

I stared at him. "*What?* You mean... create some two-headed...?"

After so long without sleep, my sense of reality was already thinly stretched. For a moment, I literally believed that I was dreaming — that I'd fallen asleep on the waiting room couch and dreamed of good news, and now my wish-fulfilling fantasy was decaying into a mocking black farce, to punish me for my ludicrous optimism.

But Allenby didn't whip out a glossy brochure, showing satisfied customers beaming cheek-to-cheek with their hosts. He said, "No, no, no. Of course not. The brain is removed from the skull completely, and encased in protective membranes, in a fluid-filled sac. And it's sited internally."

"Internally? *Where*, internally?"

He hesitated, and stole a glance at the white-coated woman, who was still hovering impatiently nearby. She seemed to take this as some kind of signal, and began to approach us. Allenby, I realized, hadn't meant her to do so, and for a moment he was flustered — but he soon regained his composure, and made the best of the intrusion.

He said, "Ms Perrini, this is Dr Gail Sumner. Without a doubt, one of this hospital's brightest young gynaecologists."

Dr Sumner flashed him a gleaming that-will-be-all-thanks smile, then put one hand on my shoulder and started to steer me away.

I went — electronically — to every bank on the planet, but they all seemed to feed my financial parameters into the same equations, and even at the most punitive interest rates, no one was willing to loan me a tenth of the amount I needed to make up the difference. Biological life support was just *so much* cheaper than traditional methods.

My younger sister, Debra, said, "Why not have a total hysterectomy? Slash and burn, yeah! That'd teach the bastards to try colonizing your womb!"

Everyone around me was going mad. "And then what? Chris ends up dead, and I end up mutilated. That's not my idea of victory."

"You would have made a point."

"I don't want to make a point."

"But you don't want to be forced to carry him, do you? Listen: if you hired the right PR people — on a contingency basis — and made the right gestures, you could get seventy, eighty per cent of the public behind you. Organize a boycott. Give this insurance company enough bad publicity, and enough financial pain, and they'll end up paying for whatever you want."

"No."

"You can't just think of yourself, Carla. You have to think of all the other women who'll be treated the same way, if you don't put up a fight."

Maybe she was right — but I knew I couldn't go through with it. I couldn't turn myself into a *cause célèbre* and battle it out in the media; I just didn't have that kind of strength, that kind of stamina. And I thought: why should I *have to*? Why should I have to mount some kind of national PR campaign, just to get a simple contract honoured fairly?

I sought legal advice.

"Of course they can't *force* you to do it. There are laws against slavery."

"Yes — but in practice, what's the alternative? What else can I actually *do*?"

"Let your husband die. Have them switch off the life support machine he's on at present. That's not illegal. The hospital can, and will, do just that, with or without your consent, the moment they're no longer being paid."

I'd already been told this half a dozen times, but I still couldn't quite believe it. "How can it be legal to murder him? It's not even euthanasia — he has every chance of recovering, every chance of leading a perfectly normal life."

The solicitor shook her head. "The technology exists to give just about anyone — however sick, however old, however badly injured — a *perfectly normal life*. But it all costs money. Resources are limited. Even if doctors and medical technicians were compelled to provide their services, free of charge, to whoever demanded them... and like I said, there are laws against slavery... well, someone, somehow, would still have to miss out. The present government sees the market as the best way of determining who that is."

"Well, I have no intention of letting him die. All I want to do is keep him on a life support *machine*,

for two years —"

"You may want it, but I'm afraid you simply can't afford it. Have you thought of hiring someone else to carry him? You're using a surrogate for his new body, why not use one for his brain? It would be expensive — but not as expensive as mechanical means. You might be able to scrape up the difference."

"There shouldn't be any fucking difference! Surrogates get paid a fortune! What gives Global Assurance the right to use *my* body for free?"

"Ah. There's a clause in your policy..." She tapped a few keys on her workstation, and read from the screen: "*... while in no way devaluing the contribution of the co-signatory as carer, he or she hereby expressly waives all entitlement to remuneration for any such services rendered; furthermore, in all calculations pursuant to paragraph 97 (b)...*"

"I thought *that* meant that neither of us could expect to get paid for nursing duties if the other spent a day in bed with the flu."

"I'm afraid the scope is much broader than that. I repeat, they *do not* have the right to compel you to do anything — but nor do they have any obligation to pay for a surrogate. When they compute the costs for the cheapest way of keeping your husband alive, this provision entitles them to do so on the basis that you *could* choose to provide him with life support."

"So ultimately, it's all a matter of... *accounting*?"

"Exactly."

For a moment, I could think of nothing more to say. I *knew* I was being screwed, but I seemed to have run out of ways to articulate the fact.

Then it finally occurred to me to ask the most obvious question of all.

"Suppose it had been the other way around. Suppose I'd been on that train, instead of Chris. Would they have paid for a surrogate then — or would they have expected *him* to carry *my* brain inside him for two years?"

The solicitor said, poker-faced, "I really wouldn't like to hazard a guess on that one."

Chris was bandaged in places, but most of his body was covered by a myriad of small machines, clinging to his skin like beneficial parasites; feeding him, oxygenating and purifying his blood, dispensing drugs, perhaps even carrying out repairs on broken bones and damaged tissue, if only for the sake of staving off further deterioration. I could see part of his face, including one eye socket — sewn shut — and patches of bruised skin here and there. His right hand was entirely bare; they'd taken off his wedding ring. Both legs had been amputated just below the thighs.

I couldn't get too close; he was enclosed in a sterile plastic tent, about five metres square, a kind of room within a room. A three-clawed nurse stood in one corner, motionless but vigilant — although I couldn't imagine the circumstances where its intervention would have been of more use than that

of the smaller robots already in place.

Visiting him was absurd, of course. He was deep in a coma, not even dreaming; I could give him no comfort. I sat there for hours, though, as if I needed to be constantly reminded that his body was injured beyond repair; that he really did need my help, *or he would not survive.*

Sometimes my hesitancy struck me as so abhorrent that I couldn't believe that I'd not yet signed the forms and begun the preparatory treatment. *His life was at stake! How could I think twice? How could I be that selfish?* And yet, this guilt itself made me almost as angry and resentful as everything else: the coercion that wasn't quite coercion, the sexual politics that I couldn't quite bring myself to confront.

To refuse, to let him die, was unthinkable. And yet ... would I have carried the brain of a total stranger? No. Letting a stranger die wasn't unthinkable at all. Would I have done it for a casual acquaintance? No. A close friend? For some, perhaps — but not for others.

So, just how much did I love him? Enough?

Of course!

Why "of course"?

It was a matter of ... *loyalty*? That wasn't the word; it smacked too much of some kind of unwritten contractual obligation, some notion of "duty," as pernicious and idiotic as patriotism. Well, "duty" could go fuck itself; that wasn't it at all.

Why, then? Why was he special? What made him different from the closest friend?

I had no answer, no right words — just a rush of emotion-charged images of Chris. So I told myself: now is not the time to analyse it, to dissect it. I don't need an answer; I know what I feel.

I lurched between despising myself, for entertaining — however theoretically — the possibility of letting him die, and despising the fact that I was being bullied into doing something with my body that I did *not* want to do. The solution, of course, would have been to do neither — but what did I expect? Some rich benefactor to step out from behind a curtain and make the dilemma vanish?

I'd seen a documentary, a week before the crash, showing some of the hundreds of thousands of men and women in central Africa, who spent their whole lives nursing dying relatives, simply because they couldn't afford the AIDS drugs that had virtually wiped out the disease in wealthier countries, twenty years before. If *they* could have saved the lives of their loved ones by the minuscule "sacrifice" of carrying an extra kilogram and a half for two years...

In the end, I gave up trying to reconcile all the contradictions. I had a right to feel angry and cheated and resentful — but the fact remained that I *wanted Chris to live*. If I wasn't going to be manipulated, it had to work both ways; reacting blindly against the way I'd been treated would have been no less stupid and dishonest than the most supine cooperation.

It occurred to me — belatedly — that Global



Assurance might not have been entirely artless in the way they'd antagonized me. After all, if I let Chris die, they'd be spared not just the meagre cost of biological life support, with the womb thrown in rent-free, but the whole expensive business of the replacement body as well. A little calculated crassness, a little reverse psychology...

The only way to keep my sanity was to transcend all this bullshit; to declare Global Assurance and their machinations irrelevant; to carry his brain — not because I'd been coerced; not because I felt guilty, or obliged; not to prove that I couldn't be manipulated — but for the simple reason that I loved him enough to want to save his life.

They injected me with a gene-tailored blastocyst, a cluster of cells which implanted in the uterine wall and *fooled* my body into thinking that I was pregnant.

Fooled? My periods ceased. I suffered morning sickness, anaemia, immune suppression, hunger pangs. The pseudo-embryo grew at a literally dizzying rate, much faster than any child, rapidly forming the protective membranes and amniotic sac, and creating a placental blood supply that would eventually have the capacity to sustain an oxygen-hungry brain.

I'd planned to work on as if nothing special was happening, but I soon discovered that I couldn't; I was just too sick, and too exhausted, to function normally. In five weeks, the thing inside me would grow to the size that a foetus would have taken *five months* to reach. I swallowed a fistful of dietary supplement capsules with every meal, but I was still too lethargic to do much more than sit around the flat, making desultory attempts to stave off boredom with books and junk TV. I vomited once or twice a day, urinated three or four times a night. All of which was bad enough — but I'm sure I felt far more miserable than these symptoms alone could have made me.

Perhaps half the problem was the lack of any simple way of *thinking about* what was happening to me. Apart from the actual structure of the "embryo," I *was* pregnant — in every biochemical and physiological sense of the word — but I could hardly let myself go along with the deception. Even half-pretending that the mass of amorphous tissue in my womb was *a child* would have been setting myself up for a complete emotional meltdown. But — what was it, then? *A tumour*? That was closer to the truth, but it wasn't exactly the kind of substitute image I needed.

Of course, intellectually, I knew precisely what was inside me, and precisely what would become of it. I was *not* pregnant with a child who was destined to be ripped out of my womb to make way for my husband's brain. I did *not* have a vampiric tumour that would keep on growing until it drained so much blood from me that I'd be too weak to move. I was carrying a benign growth, a tool designed for a specific task — a task that I'd decided to accept.

So why did I feel perpetually confused, and depressed — and at times, so desperate that I fantasised about suicide and miscarriage, about slashing myself open, or throwing myself down the stairs? I was tired, I was nauseous, I didn't expect to be dancing for joy — but why was I so fucking unhappy that I couldn't stop thinking of death?

I could have recited some kind of explanatory mantra: *I'm doing this for Chris. I'm doing this for Chris.*

I didn't, though. I already resented him enough; I didn't want to end up hating him.

Early in the sixth week, an ultrasound scan showed that the amniotic sac had reached the necessary size, and Doppler analysis of the blood flow confirmed that it, too, was on target. I went into hospital for the substitution.

I could have paid Chris one final visit, but I stayed away. I didn't want to dwell upon the mechanics of what lay ahead.

Dr Sumner said, "There's nothing to worry about. Foetal surgery far more complex than this is routine."

I said, through gritted teeth, "This isn't foetal surgery."

She said, "Well... no." As if the news were a revelation.

When I woke after the operation, I felt sicker than ever. I rested one hand on my belly; the wound was clean and numb, the stitches hidden. I'd been told that there wouldn't even be a scar. I thought: *He's inside me. They can't hurt him now. I've won that much.*

I closed my eyes. I had no trouble imagining Chris, the way he'd been — the way he would be, again. I drifted half-way back to sleep, shamelessly dredging up images of all the happiest times we'd had. I'd never indulged in sentimental reveries before — it wasn't my style, I hated living in the past — but any trick that sustained me was welcome now. I let myself hear his voice, see his face, feel his touch —

His body, of course, was dead now. Irreversibly dead. I opened my eyes and looked down at the bulge in my abdomen, and pictured what it contained: a lump of meat from his corpse. A lump of grey meat, torn from the skull of his corpse.

I'd fasted for surgery, my stomach was empty, I had nothing to throw up. I lay there for hours, wiping sweat off my face with a corner of the sheet, trying to stop shaking.

In terms of bulk, I was five months pregnant. In terms of weight, seven months. For two years.

If Kafka had been a woman...

I didn't grow used to it, but I did learn to cope. There were ways to sleep, ways to sit, ways to move that were easier than others. I was tired all day long, but there were times when I had enough energy to feel almost normal again, and I made good use of them. I worked hard, and I didn't fall behind. The Department was launching a new blitz

on corporate tax evasion; I threw myself into it with more zeal than I'd ever felt before. My enthusiasm was artificial, but that wasn't the point; I needed the momentum to carry me through.

On good days, I felt optimistic: weary, as always, but triumphantly persistent. On bad days, I thought: You bastards, you think this will make me hate him? It's *you* I'll resent, *you* I'll despise. On bad days, I made plans for Global Assurance. I hadn't been ready to fight them before, but when Chris was safe, and my strength had returned, I'd find a way to hurt them.

The reactions of my colleagues were mixed. Some were admiring. Some thought I'd let myself be exploited. Some were simply revolted by the thought of a *human brain* floating in my womb — and to challenge my own squeamishness, I confronted these people as often as I could.

"Go on, touch it," I said. "It won't bite. It won't even kick."

There was a brain in my womb, pale and convoluted. *So what?* I had an equally unappealing object in my own skull. In fact, my whole body was full of repulsive-looking offal — a fact which had never bothered me before. So I conquered my visceral reactions to the organ *per se* — but thinking about Chris himself remained a difficult balancing act.

I resisted the insidious temptation to delude myself that I might be "in touch" with him — by "telepathy," through the bloodstream, by any means at all. Maybe pregnant mothers had some genuine empathy with their unborn children; I'd never been pregnant, it wasn't for me to judge. Certainly, a child in the womb could hear its mother's voice — but a comatose brain, devoid of sense organs, was a different matter entirely. At best — or worst — perhaps certain hormones in my blood crossed the placenta and had some limited effect on his condition.

On his mood?

He was in a coma, he had no mood.

In fact, it was easiest, and safest, not to think of him as even being *located* inside me, let alone experiencing anything there. I was carrying a part of him; the surrogate mother of his clone was carrying another. Only when the two were united would he truly exist again; for now, he was in limbo, neither dead nor alive.

This pragmatic approach worked, most of the time. Of course, there were moments when I suffered a kind of panic at the renewed realization of the bizarre nature of what I'd done. Sometimes I'd wake from nightmares, believing — for a second or two — that Chris was dead and his spirit had possessed me; or that his brain had sent forth nerves into my body and taken control of my limbs; or that he was fully conscious, and going insane from loneliness and sensory deprivation. But I wasn't possessed, my limbs still obeyed me, and every month a PET scan and a "uterine EEG" proved that he was still comatose — undamaged, but mentally inert.

In fact, the dreams I hated the most were those

in which I was carrying a child. I'd wake from these with one hand on my belly, rapturously contemplating the miracle of the new life growing inside me — until I came to my senses and dragged myself angrily out of bed. I'd start the morning in the foulest of moods, grinding my teeth as I pissed, banging plates at the breakfast table, screaming insults at no one in particular while I dressed. Lucky I was living alone.

I couldn't really blame my poor besieged body for trying, though. My over-sized, marathon pregnancy dragged on and on; no wonder it tried to compensate me for the inconvenience with some stiff medicinal doses of maternal love. How ungrateful my rejection must have seemed; how baffling to find its images and sentiments rejected as *inappropriate*.

So... I trampled on Death, and I trampled on Motherhood. Well, *halleluiah*. If sacrifices had to be made, what better victims could there have been than those two emotional slavedrivers? And it was easy, really; logic was on my side, with a vengeance. Chris was *not* dead; I had no reason to mourn him, whatever had become of the body I'd known. And the thing in my womb was not a child; permitting a disembodied brain to be the object of motherly love would have been simply farcical.

We think of our lives as circumscribed by cultural and biological taboos, but if people really want to break them, they always seem to find a way. Human beings are capable of anything: torture, genocide, cannibalism, rape. After which — or so I'd heard — most can still be kind to children and animals, be moved to tears by music, and generally behave as if all their emotional faculties are intact.

So, what reason did I have to fear that my own minor — and utterly selfless — transgressions could do me any harm at all?

I never met the new body's surrogate mother, I never saw the clone as a child. I did wonder, though — once I knew that the thing had been born — whether or not she'd found her "normal" pregnancy as distressing as I'd found mine. Which is easiest, I wondered: carrying a brain-damaged child-shaped object, with no potential for human thought, grown from a stranger's DNA — or carrying the sleeping brain of your lover? Which is the hardest to keep from loving in inappropriate ways?

At the start, I'd hoped to be able to blur all the details in my mind — I'd wanted to be able to wake one morning and pretend that Chris had merely been *sick*, and was now *recovered*. Over the months, though, I'd come to realise that it was never going to work that way.

When they took out the brain, I should have felt — at the very least — relieved, but I just felt numb, and vaguely disbelieving. The ordeal had gone on for so long; it *couldn't* be over with so little fuss: no trauma, no ceremony. I'd had surreal dreams of laboriously, but triumphantly, giving birth to a



healthy pink brain — but even if I'd wanted that (and no doubt the process could have been induced), the organ was too delicate to pass safely through the vagina. This "Caesarian" removal was just one more blow to my biological expectations; a good thing, of course, in the long run, since my biological expectations could never be fulfilled... but I still couldn't help feeling slightly cheated.

So I waited, in a daze, for the proof that it had all been worthwhile.

The brain couldn't simply be transplanted into the clone, like a heart or a kidney. The peripheral nervous system of the new body wasn't identical to that of the old one; identical genes weren't sufficient to ensure that. Also — despite drugs to limit the effect — parts of Chris's brain had atrophied slightly from disuse. So, rather than splicing nerves directly between the imperfectly matched brain and body — which probably would have left him paralyzed, deaf, dumb and blind — the impulses would be routed through a computerized "interface," which would try to sort out the discrepancies. Chris would still have to be rehabilitated, but the computer would speed up the

process enormously, constantly striving to bridge the gap between thought and action, between reality and perception.

The first time they let me see him, I didn't recognize him at all. His face was slack, his eyes unfocused; he looked like a large, neurologically impaired child — which, of course, he was. I felt a mild twinge of revulsion. The man I'd seen after the train wreck, swarming with medical robots, had looked far more human, far more whole.

I said, "Hello. It's me."

He stared into space.

The technician said, "It's early days."

She was right. In the weeks that followed, his progress (or the computer's) was astounding. His posture and expression soon lost their disconcerting neutrality, and the first helpless twitches rapidly gave way to coordinated movement; weak and clumsy, but encouraging. He couldn't talk, but he could meet my eyes, he could squeeze my hand.

He was *in there*, he was *back*, there was no doubt about that.

I worried about his silence — but I discovered later that he'd deliberately spared me his early, faltering attempts at speech.

One evening in the fifth week of his new life, when I came into the room and sat down beside the bed, he turned to me and said clearly, "They told me what you did. Oh God, Carla, I love you!"

His eyes filled with tears. I bent over and embraced him; it seemed like the right thing to do. And I cried, too — but I even as I did so, I couldn't help thinking: None of this can really touch me. It's just one more trick of the body, and I'm immune to all that now.

We made love on the third night he spent at home. I'd expected it to be difficult, a massive psychological hurdle for both of us, but that wasn't the case at all. And after everything we'd come through, why should it have been? I don't know what I'd feared; some poor misguided avatar of the Incest Taboo, crashing through the bedroom window at the critical moment, spurred on by the ghost of a discredited 19th-century misogynist?

I suffered no delusion at any level — from the merely subconscious, right down to the endocrine — that Chris was *my son*. Whatever effects two years of placental hormones might have had on me, whatever behavioural programs they "ought" to have triggered, I'd apparently gained the strength and the insight to undermine completely.

True, his skin was soft and unweathered, and devoid of the scars of a decade of hacking off facial hair. He might have passed for a sixteen-year-old, but I felt no qualms about *that* — any middle-aged man who was rich enough and vain enough could have looked the same.

And when he put his tongue to my breasts, I did not lactate.

We soon started visiting friends; they were tactful, and Chris was glad of that — although

personally, I'd have happily discussed any aspect of the procedure. Six months later, he was working again; his old job had been taken, but a new firm was recruiting (and they wanted a youthful image).

Piece by piece, our lives were reassembled.

Nobody, looking at us now, would think that anything had changed.

But they'd be wrong.

To love a *brain* as if it were a *child* would be ludicrous. Geese might be stupid enough to treat the first animal they see upon hatching as their mother, but there are limits to what a sane human being will swallow. So, reason triumphed over instinct, and I conquered my inappropriate love; under the circumstances, there was never really any contest.

Having deconstructed one form of enslavement, though, I find it all too easy to repeat the process, to recognize the very same chains in another guise.

Everything special I once felt for Chris is transparent to me now. I still feel genuine friendship for him, I still feel desire, but there used to be something more. If there hadn't been, I doubt he'd be alive today.

Oh, the signals keep coming through; some part of my brain still pumps out cues for *appropriate* feelings of tenderness, but these messages are as laughable, and as ineffectual, now, as the contrivances of some tenth rate tear-jerking movie. I just can't suspend my disbelief anymore.

I have no trouble going through the motions; inertia makes it easy. And as long as things are working — as long as his company is pleasant and the sex is good — I see no reason to rock the boat. We may stay together for years, or I may walk out tomorrow. I really don't know.

Of course I'm still glad that he survived — and to some degree, I can even admire the courage and selflessness of the woman who saved him. I know that I could never do the same.

Sometimes when we're together, and I see in his eyes the very same helpless passion that I've lost, I'm tempted to pity myself. I think: I was *brutalized*, no wonder I'm a cripple, no wonder I'm so fucked-up.

And in a sense, that's a perfectly valid point of view — but I never seem to be able to subscribe to it for long. The new truth has its own cool passion, its own powers of manipulation; it assails me with words like "freedom" and "insight," and speaks of the end of all deception. It grows inside me, day by day, and it's far too strong to let me have regrets.

Greg Egan needs no introduction to the readers of this magazine. His stories "The Caress" (*Asimov's*, January 1990) and "Learning to Be Me" (*Interzone* 37) have just been reprinted by Gardner Dozois in his anthology *The Year's Best SF, Eighth Annual Collection* (New York: St Martin's Press, \$27.95). Dozois says in his editorial notes: "This was a good year for hot new Australian writer Greg Egan. Although he's been publishing for a year or two already, 1990 was the year when Egan suddenly seemed to be turning up everywhere with high-quality stories... My guess is that he is on his way, and with considerable velocity, to establishing a career for himself as a full-time writer...and probably a formidable reputation as well."



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Remnants

Diane Mapes

When I ask her what they're talking about, my wife and her mother, or my wife and her sisters, or my wife and any of the flint-eyed women that traipse through my home — their skirts rustling, their tongues clucking, their handbags cluttering up the furniture like plump leather frogs, contents spilling out onto the carpeting and the counters like viscera from a gutted cow (the ragged scraps of paper thick with runes, the secret vials of powder and cream, the twisted bits of metal, of yarn, of thread) — she only laughs and says needlepoint.

Or cooking. Or sewing. Or the church bazaar that will be held the following Saturday. Or the cupcake sale she's organizing for Children's Orthopaedic (oh, yes, she's such a devoted champion of children). Or the Labour Day Bonanza down at Ross Dress for Less — *Eliza Mason got two nightgowns for only \$16, can you believe that, and they're both flannel and flannel never goes on sale during the winter, flannel only goes on sale in the summer, everybody knows that.*

Oh, but I know better.

My wife, she thinks she's clever. She thinks she can prattle on and on about bake sales and nightgowns and I will be not be suspicious, content in the knowledge that she is just a woman and a woman is hardly something to worry about, just as a steer knows — *knows*, mind you — that the grain is only to keep him from going hungry and never to fatten him up. After all, my wife is a homemaker, a housewife, a little woman, a better half, any of those innocuous terms that make up a husband's complacent lexicon, his dictionary of household usage, his very own copy of *Pun'kin Head and Sugar Bosoms: Phrases Sure to Please*, from whose voluminous pages will be found no term coming anywhere close to intimating that there might be something *powerful* about her and all of her kind, that there might be something *dangerous* about the way she wields a needle or a knife, that there might be something *secretive* about the way she tucks the bright square of gingham over the contents of her sewing basket each time I enter in the room.

Oh yes, my wife is clever. The bright gingham

square over the contents of the sewing basket, the carefully cued segues in the washday conversation, the warning glances to her friends as they are about to unknowingly impart a sampling of their hidden secret language while I stand poised at the threshold of the room, the decoy pitcher of iced tea sweating on its tray.

My wife, she is clever, yes, but she is not clever enough not nearly clever enough. I have seen the evidence of her mysteries, the insidious darkness that permeates my household, my home, my castle. The markings on the calendar so many times coinciding with the phases of the moon, the recipes full of code phrases and double meanings — a pinch of this, a twist of that. Of what? I wonder, the neck of a chicken, a child, a man? The hidden pink packages in the bathroom wastebasket, like small tongues they are, small dead tongues neatly wrapped in pretty pink paper, soft and delicate as the crepe that lines coffins.

Oh yes, I have seen them, I've unwrapped the paper and peered at their blackened corpses, and I have seen her face as well, hot with guilt as I confront her with their number. Where would she get so many tongues, I wonder, why would she take them? Were they wagged in her direction too many times — the accusing tongues of fathers, brothers, boyfriends — until they were finally ripped out by their bloody roots? Are they mere poppets fashioned of paper and wax, a warning to all who would patronize and judge (the scolding school teachers, the clucking market managers), bound and gagged at last by a tiny pink tendril of her powerful dark magic?

The house is full of such magic, full of her icons, her charms. The winding vacuum cleaner cords that snake around my legs and trip me at every opportunity, the precariously balanced vials of powder that topple from the bathroom cupboards and into my bathwater as I lie seeking a few moments of respite, her noxious poisons seeping into my skin, burning my body as surely as my forefathers burned the bodies of the sluts that spawned her kind. The bathroom is full of such magic, the kitchen as well. I have rifled the

drawers of the room, my bones chilling at the sight of her gatherings, her collections — the pens and rubber bands, twisted together in unholy unions, the pregnant bundles of raggedly torn coupons and scatterings of favoured buttons, the drawer upon drawer of empty paper sacks.

What would any normal person want with so many sacks, I asked myself before I realized the true nefarious nature of their purpose, before I began to see her sneak into the bedroom at night, my sleep assured by a selection from one of many morphic charms, a sack in her hand, her breath held tight, her eyes bright and amused as she stooped to slip it over my head, leaving it on for ten minutes one night, twenty the next, robbing me of my oxygen, befuddling me with her wiles, as her mother and sisters and friends have robbed and befuddled their husbands night upon night, year upon year, age upon age.

Do they rob their boy children of oxygen, too, or is that something that starts when they reach manhood? And when do they initiate the girls, when do they show them what lies within their sewing baskets — bright swirling energy, a nest of snakes or fingers or tongues — when do they instruct them in the fine art of tatting and asphyxiation? When do they hand them their first set of shears, whispering *"Snip, snip, dear, remember the stitch in time."* A dangling thread, a questioning tongue. Just one quick snip and the problem is gone, gone for good, tossed into the waste paper basket wrapped in a lovely pink chiffon.

My wife pretends that it is not her doing, this impotency. She shifts uncomfortably in her rocking chair, needling her way into my workshirts as easily as a demon puncturing the fabric of my soul, refusing to meet my eye for fear that I will see the satisfaction, the gloating, the amusement, pretending that she has not tied the knots in my shoelaces that have stopped up the flow of my semen, has not wound the suffocating yarn around the secreted form of a limp cloth poppet.

My wife, she snips a thread from the inseam of a pair of pants and ties yet another knot, slowly, deliberately, her slender fingers weaving spells with her cloth as she weaves them with my mind. The pants will fit tighter now, I know, will bind and draw my genitals into a knot of tight hard pain, will smother the life out of my penis as surely as she has smothered the life from a score of helpless children.

Crib death they call it, yes, and so many in the neighbourhood, too, such a shame. Oh, but I know better, I have seen her with her pillows, how she plumps and readies them for their grim nocturnal tasks. I have seen the tiny curled hairs, so fine as to be invisible, on the flannel coverings; I have smelled the baby oil and powders and felt the terror of the infant's midnight passings. It is only time before I'll overcome her nightly poisoning and will see her crawl back through the window, her pillows fresh with choked cries and the bilious stench of small deaths.



I have watched her talking to the pillowcases while she folds the laundry — like old dear friends they are, Vlad the Impaler and his trusty spikes. I have heard the shared confidences, the low chuckles. My wife has come to suspect my knowledge, I fear, has felt the awareness of my glance, my stares.

My wife, I fear, has left the sewing basket open for a reason.

She has gone into the bathroom, that feminine retreat, as impenetrable now as the warm canal between her legs. What does she do in there with all the vials of powder, the toothless collection of combs, the harsh, seductive magazines full of words and looks and ways? What does she do with the door locked and the lights on and the water running, what kind of spell is she working with the tangled cords and spent motors of the hairdriers, the browned damp pads from her compacts, the slick tubes of colour, sticky and thick as coagulated blood? Is she constructing a woman of paper and print and wax inside that impenetrable fortress, a painted doppelganger to send to my bed to seduce and demean? A woman dressed in yards of silk and lace, a sleek plastic woman, with teeth of chalk and nails of nylon, a succubus to drain me of my seed, my energy, my desires.

Is she after my very soul, I wonder, staring at



the closed door, watching black shadows flit back and forth before the slit of light underneath, shadows too large, too impenetrable, to belong to a mere woman, shadows of a demon dancing a minuet, a gargoyle pirouetting on the side of the bathtub. What is she doing, and why does she do it? What is her power and why must I know it?

The sewing basket lies before me, the gingham square tossed casually to one side, like a cover tossed back to reveal the long slender legs of the succubus that beckons me, closer ever closer. What is it that writhes and swirls and laughs within those tiny woven confines? What kind of magic allows her to control a man's soul with the crook of a finger, the flick of a glance, the tiniest trace of perfume? What is it that she knows? Where has she learned it? In the stark porcelain bathrooms — the girl's rooms, the women's rooms — where brutish matrons have mounted metal boxes like slot machines or coffee dispensers, where for the price of a nickel, a dime, a quarter, she can buy her magic in monthly increments? Was it the film so often talked about among her sisters' lackeys, those grinning apes gambolling forth in their suits, bringing home pieces of their soul imprinted on green safety bond? The film projected by the fifth grade teachers after carefully segregating all boys from the room, the film I cannot remember. *This is how to steal their souls*, the female narrator carefully explains to the rapt eleven-year-olds. *This is how to make them naked; this is how to make them bleed.*

The basket lies open, wanting, and I am drawn towards it, the sounds of water running, of cabinets opening and closing, of toilets mundanely flushing, fading into the background, blending with the

hammering of my heart, the roaring of blood in my ears. They are sounds carefully designed to sooth and encourage me — much like the sounds of her low moans as I enter her (entered her, it has been so long, so long) — to assure me that I have time, that I have opportunity, that I have her blessing in perusing her magic.

Look into the basket, I can hear the purr of her voice, and whether she is standing behind me or speaking to me through the layer of wood and flesh and brain, I do not know. I creep forward, afraid, afraid. Is my tongue destined to join all the others? It has started to feel loose already; I fear my eyes will follow.

There are scraps hanging out of the basket, pieces of cloth and thread, like veins they are, veins and tendons and flaps of muscle and skin. The colours vary — sometimes reds and pinks, sometimes blacks and browns — there seems no pattern, no preference, no plan.

Look into the basket, I hear the voice again, and I feel myself pulled towards the fleshy scraps as a curtain pulled along its rod, a drying towel brought in from the clothesline. With trembling fingers I reach out and touch a wrinkled swath of cloth, the cloth suddenly withdraws and I see that it is a lithe silver snake, its tongue flicking out at me, deadly and beautiful. Snakes are in the basket then, I say, stepping forward. Snakes and tongues and swirling masses of colour, as I suspected, the entire power of the universe, the hidden secrets of the ancients, yet I see no swirling pools of energy as I lean over it. I see a zipper, curled in the bottom of the basket like a tiny silver cobra; I see spools and a tissue paper pattern and a package of tiny, sharp needles, nearly empty.

And nestled amid it all, I see a gold thimble, as unimaginative and nondescript as the midnight deaths of the poor neighbours' children. I have been a fool then I tell myself, surveying the pedestrian package of notions. She is a woman, a wife, nothing more. Vanity keeps her before the bathroom mirror; foolishness keeps her in coupons and sacks. There is no magic, there is no power, except for that which I have failed to wield as I should, as every man should.

And then the thimble slowly turns, its sides cupped to catch my scream, and I hear her sigh behind me, the sigh of a seamstress unraveling an unruly seam, a tailor dismantling a poorly-made suit, and I recognize the crumpled pattern as I fall into her basket, a pattern similar to mine yet free of the frayed fabric of suspicion, the shattered silk of fear. Will she use my eyes as buttons? Will she take my hair as thread?

Diane Mapes wrote "Shallow Grave" (*Interzone* 46). She lives near Seattle, Washington State, USA, and has contributed stories to various small American and Canadian magazines. She has also sold work to *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine*. We'll be hearing a good deal more of her, no doubt.

Angels, Babies and at Last, Frozen Yoghurt

Colin Greenland talks to Rachel Pollack

When, in Rachel Pollack's *Unquenchable Fire*, Jennie Mazdan goes to see a hooker in upstate New York, the encounter is not quite what we might expect it to be. The hooker is a woman called Mary Landis, and she's the vice-president of a company. Recently acquitted of a whole slew of corporate crimes from embezzlement to illegal advertising, Mary Landis is offering thanks for divine intervention.

Announced on a local breakfast radio interview, the form of her expiation is perfectly traditional. Barefoot and naked, her hair braided and decorated with totems, she has herself covered from head to toe with glittering mud, then suspended from a gallows by wires attached to four small hooks inserted in her back and thighs. In a trance, she calls out oracular answers to questions shouted from the large crowd of spectators. "The Sun sings from beneath the bed," she chants. "Seven rows of snakes crawl on the tabletop."

When Jennie Mazdan surprises herself by shouting out a question of her own — "What's wrong with me?"

— the hooker starts chanting, "A fish is swimming in your womb. The Earth is boiling with colour." And she won't stop. The TV cameras turn and professional interpreters press their business cards on Jennie as she fights her way out of the mall.

Unquenchable Fire is a wonderful patchwork of scenes like that — bizarre, alarming, poignant, colourful, comic with a characteristic wry Jewish irony — all so finely and cunningly sewn that the seams are quite invisible. "What I wanted to do," Rachel Pollack says, "was project a transformed contemporary America, where storytelling, ritual, and shamanic ecstasy form the centre of the culture, while at the same time that culture remains the one we know." The culture of small-town America Rachel Pollack knows inside out. Poughkeepsie was where she spent her childhood, and now, after many years in Amsterdam, Holland, she's recently returned to live nearby.

What's wrong with Jennie Mazdan, according to her neighbours, her mother, her ex-husband, and the bureaucracy that surrounds the exalted and glamorous Tellers like a forest of thorns, is that she has a bad attitude. She's neglecting the rituals, failing in her spiritual and community duties, suffering visions and dreams not recognized by the catalogues of the National Oneiric Registration Agency. But her trouble is more grave even than an unlisted dream. Like the heroine of "Angel Baby," Pollack's 1982 *Interzone* story, Jennie is pregnant, without her consent, by a supernatural visitant.

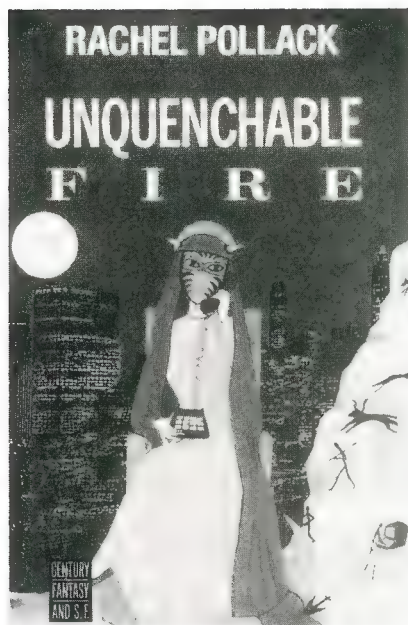
Appropriately, *Unquenchable Fire* had an unscheduled origin of its own. It was meant, says Pollack, to be the biography of Valerie Mazdan, a radical storyteller. "Magical biographies begin with a magical birth, so I began with Valerie's mother. For years, since childhood, really, I've been reading material on shamanism, myth, and traditional cultures, and I'd read something about Zoroaster, that he shone so bright in his mother's womb that the neighbours



thought the house was on fire. That was what I had in mind." Then she remembered a discussion from twenty-five years before, about Leda and the Swan, and a remark by a college teacher.

"What would have happened, he said, if Gabriel had announced to Mary that she would bear the son of God, and Mary had said, 'No, thanks. I don't want to lose my figure'? Well, in my novel, Jennie Mazdan becomes pregnant from a dream, and she's furious, not because she wants to keep her figure, but because she doesn't want to be used, to be manipulated. Jennie came to me as someone who thinks of herself as weak, a victim, but in fact has a will of iron. She took over the book from the moment I introduced her."

During her college studies of theological and psychological works on myth, Pollack began to compose her own mythic cycle. Some of those stories found their way into *Unquenchable Fire*, alongside others which she describes as "weaving together existent myths. 'Dustfather and Mothersnake,' for instance. That



story draws on Isis and Osiris, Orpheus and Eurydice, the Japanese pair Izanagi and Izanami, and circumcision rituals in Australia and elsewhere."

Dustfather and Mothersnake are the primal couple, mating on top of the World Trade Center in New York. When Dustfather is dismembered by maenads, Mothersnake searches for years for his scattered remains. The city Parks Department sends squads of unemployed students to dig up the streets for her, and teams of doctors, art teachers and engineers supervise the enormous task of reconstruction. Unable to find his penis, which is off elsewhere creating joyful havoc among a colony of female separatists, Mothersnake advertises in the personal columns: "Woman seeks precious remnant of husband. Reward for all information."

Pollack smiles hugely. "That's partly why *Unquenchable Fire* is funny," she says, "because of the juxtapositions. Animal masks and howling rituals in downtown Poughkeepsie. But it's also funny because the mythic imagination is not grand, or philosophical, or sweet, or even mystical. It is literal, and so it's absurd, by our rationalist standards. Some of the wildest ideas in that book come directly from ritual practices of one culture or another. That 'hanging' in the Poughkeepsie Mall is an actual popular festival every year in Sri Lanka."

At this point I have to wonder what Sri Lanka's most famous British resident thinks of the book that, in 1989, received the annual award that bears his name.

"Arthur C. Clarke wrote me a very nice letter when I won," Pollack recalls. "He said he hadn't read *Unquenchable Fire*, but he did say he would appreciate at some point the award going to a British writer, since his whole idea was to promote British writers, and the first three awards were given to two Americans and an Australian. He must be very happy that Geoff Ryman won the fourth," she adds, mischievously.

The Clarke Award has some importance to her. "It makes me feel there's recognition. Gives me the feeling that there are people out there who appreciate what I'm doing."

What she's doing is, like much of the best of the genre, out on the edge where science fiction becomes something else. Her first novel, *Alqua Dreams*, published in Britain the year after *Unquenchable Fire*, was an interplanetary story, and it too had an element of shamanism, of the real but irrational. "It has seemed to me for a long time that science fiction, ecstatic

otherworld journeys, and paranoid delusions all intertwine. I believe," she says simply, "that the imagination creates the world."

Pollack has quite detailed ideas about her relationship with the genre. "*Unquenchable Fire* is loosely science fiction, because it depicts an alternative world, but the alternative world doesn't hold up under scrutiny. I deliberately sabotage the plausibility. It's supposedly based on a revolution that took place eighty-seven years before the story begins, at Disneyland, but the internal evidence is that the revolution occurs in our society now. And yet the society that's pictured is also our society now. In that sense I was deliberately avoiding the rules of alternative worlds, in which the interest is in seeing how cleverly the writer has worked out, rationally, this alternative reality. With *The Man in the High Castle* by Philip K. Dick, it's always amazed me that what people seem to praise most often is that he worked it out so logically and cleverly, whereas to me what's interesting are the human and the metaphysical levels."

She illustrates what she means. "Do you know his short story 'I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon'? That's devastating. It's about someone who's on a flight to a far planet, and the suspended animation machine breaks down. To try to keep him sane, there's another machine that generates a fantasy for him of the perfect life he'll have when he arrives. Well, that machine is always breaking down too, the beautiful, glowing scenario is constantly breaking down and becoming a nightmare. When he finally reaches the planet, he thinks that's still happening. He has become insane, and he can't believe it's real. So he never can arrive."

Implausible or no, Pollack agrees with me that, like Dick's, her writing performs thoroughly sf's primary task of estranging the familiar and familiarizing the strange. "What I've found is that people who've read *Unquenchable Fire* could see more than I could: its basis, its rootedness in science-fiction traditions, particularly the one where you throw the reader into an alien society of some kind and she has to find out what these people are about. More than I quite realized, I think, I was working from my knowledge of science fiction as to how that's done."

Is she pleased to be surprised by her readers? "Oh, they can always do that. Once I was teaching a tarot workshop, and someone quoted something back to me. I said, 'Did I

write that?' I didn't recognize it!"

Pollack's writings on the tarot are extensive and well-regarded. Her most famous is the text for the book of Salvador Dali's version of the deck. Her most recent is *The New Tarot*, a study of seventy different tarots produced in the last fifteen years. It includes eight hundred pictures. "I wrote it partly because I couldn't afford to buy all those new decks, and I figured if I wrote a book I could get review copies!"

"*Unquenchable Fire* took about five years to write, but three of those five years were accumulated periods of doing other things." Current projects include the *Shining Woman* tarot, a new deck of her own design and illustration; a book on "The Body of the Goddess in Landscape, Temple and Art"; a graphic novel; and a novel based on Grimm's fairytales, called *Godmother Night*. "The main characters," she says, with the air of an author pleased with the succinctness of a phrase, "are two women, their daughter, and Death." Also, *Unquenchable Fire*, published in Britain by Century Hutchinson in 1988, may at last be about to see print in the U.S.A.

Conservative as the U.S. publishing industry notoriously is, it seems perverse that this rich and marvelous native portrait has not yet been snapped up and celebrated by the nation that elevated Mark Helprin's *Winter's Tale* to the bestseller lists. Pollack, who worked in the book trade in Amsterdam, has thoughts about this.

"I have a feeling a big mistake is made by this assumption that a book which is in any way experimental or unusual is something you publish for prestige, or because you want to, but you're not going to make money on it. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy. I believe the sales people could see that you can make a breakthrough, and maybe make a lot of money, by taking the approach that an innovative book is going to be a smash success. It's possible to put forward an unusual book as something that everyone's been waiting for. If you introduce frozen yoghurt instead of ice cream, you have to persuade your sales people not to say, 'Don't expect it to be familiar, but you might like it if you don't want ice cream,' but rather to say, 'This is it, this is what you've been waiting for, frozen yoghurt at last!'"

Yoghurt apart, Pollack does detect effects of her long exile on her work.

"My writing has become more British, I'm not sure exactly how. I think it lacks the glowing, sunny op-

timism of American science fiction. It has a concern for human pain, which is a major constituent of the mainstream literary tradition, and is lacking in a lot of science fiction, which works in a pocket universe. Which is why I love Philip K. Dick's work so much, because of that very deep awareness of human pain; and at the same time he's so comic and witty."

I kept thinking of Dick while reading *Unquenchable Fire*, with its scenes of backyard politics and midnight panic, its delicatessen apocalypse, its divine revelations dispensed by a chocolate chip cookie vendor. I kept thinking of Stanley Spencer too, and William Blake: visionaries who loved the human race in all its dishevelled pettiness. Apart from Philip K. Dick, Pollack doesn't read much science fiction: "a few writers: William Gibson, Chris Priest, Jonathan Carroll, James Morrow as well. *Neuromancer* was the best of Gibson's books. The next two became more conventional: they explained things, they told you what things were about.

"The kind of reading I like is rooted in the demands of serious literature and at the same time is breaking out of realism in some way. I find traditional social realism very boring. I look for very elliptical, playful writing, with a lot of parodies of popular culture, that kind of thing. Speculative thinking; books that play with ideas, that play with literary expectations, and with language.

"A sophisticated use of language is important to me in what I read. Characters are not as important to me as language, though of course I'm not interested in books that have weak characters, or cliché characters. Seeing the author's hands manipulating the narrative is okay, but not the

characters. Even though we're now supposedly post-post-modernism, with this new realism stuff that's been coming out in recent years, I like post-modernism a lot. I'm an unreconstructed Donald Barthelme fan."

When Pollack's first stories "Pandora's Bust" (more angels) and "Tubs of Slaw" (more free-floating genitals) appeared in *New Worlds* in the early '70s, it was chic to claim that the literary mainstream had dried up, and that sf was the only fiction worth reading. One can still hear the rhetoric today; but not from Rachel Pollack.

"It's true that a lot of mainstream fiction is very boring. A lot of the novels that get a lot of attention in the press are extremely dull. That doesn't mean that sf is *therefore* superior. The idea that genre fiction has its value proven by pointing out the weakness of Margaret Drabble and Anita Brookner is silly. It's like creationist thinking: you know, if we can prove the hole in Darwin, then the literal interpretation of Genesis has to be correct. It keeps writers at a low standard, it keeps them from trying to make their work reach a high level of sophistication, energy, daring... But if the outside world is treating your work as of no importance, no matter how good it is, then it's really difficult to keep doing good work. There's nobody listening to it.

"Because sf has been in a ghetto, and a lot of people who read sf read only sf, the standards have become so low. The standards for creating characters, use of language, structuring plot, tend to be fairly minimal. People compare sf to sf — not to, say, Kafka, but to Heinlein. Now Heinlein is the great model for several things, but he is very limited in other areas. I think people need to have a wider range of reference. Look at Theodore

Sturgeon. His great achievement was to give sf a vocabulary of emotion. But when he died there were eulogies from younger sf writers, claiming he was the best writer since Shakespeare. It softens the work terribly to have that kind of éclat."

The Sturgeon hyperbole sounds ridiculous today; and so, when time has passed, do quarrels over status and purity within the genre. In conversation with Ursula Le Guin at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts, Lisa Tuttle observed how much ground had been clawed back from feminist writers of the '70s by male writers arising in the '80s to promulgate various exclusive, prescriptive programmes for "real" sf. Pollack agrees. "When people start arguing about which kind is superior, I think it's silly. At the same time, I do regret the split between people who can write fiction grounded in speculative thinking, and those who can write feeling characters. Somehow they're now two separate camps. A lot of humanistic sf is a little bit boring to me, because there's so little science fiction in it. On the other side you've got these books that are filled with fantastic ideas, but the characters are what I'd call half-dimensional. They haven't reached the level of one-dimensional characters.

"I don't know if it's true, but I was told by someone that at the Cyberpunk conference in Leeds one of the very well-known 'hard' sf writers was talking about the drift of science fiction away from science towards pseudo-literary territory, and he said with horror that the epitome of this drift was Rachel Pollack winning the Arthur C. Clarke Award. So perhaps," she muses, "the way my publishers need to publicize my work is to say it produces horror in traditional sf writers. Yes," she advises me. "Say I'm notorious."

Interaction

Continued from page 5

his silky crown, disabused his frowning parents of their pastel-hued expectations and set-to with gummy proficiency at the bars of his pen, than his poor heart failed him. The cause of death: Methuselah's Syndrome aggravated by severe colic and rampant self-abuse. The little bugger simply wore himself out. Unusual you might suppose, but then it is an acknowledged commonplace these days that a diet of junk food and TV will lead to infantile hyperactivity.

One is given to understand that all those wishing to convey their condolences to the bereaved should do so through the agency of that estimable firm of solicitors Sterling, Shirley, Shiner and Sprawl Esq.; Austin, Texas.

'Vespaluus'

Dear Editor:

Interzone continues to thrive and grow. There are things I dislike about it, but I don't need a safe magazine. I enjoy discovering new writers and new ideas through your pages. Please maintain and increase the variety of directions you journey into. My personal preference is for the more human stories, with a nod to the fantastical rather than the "radical hard" sf, eg. I enjoy Ballard, Kilworth and Newman.

Being a reader from Day One, may I offer a few personal thoughts:

1. Art. I must agree with P. J. L. Hinder (IZ 48) in saying that much of the interior art is not up to scratch. Looking at No. 48, only Iain Byers and Martin McKenna make the grade (Mike Hadley — oh dear!). If you aim to be a quality publication you must improve. The layout could do with a

shake-up.

2. *Contents*. The non-fiction is quite good — the interviews are my favourite, and I feel the book reviews could benefit from a new voice. But the fiction should still be increased! Good they may be, but book and film reviews can be read in many publications — there aren't many quality, sf fiction magazines. This is your strength, your unique talent — play on it! More fiction! I'd prefer more long stories — many of the two pagers aren't worth the bother. And it's nice to have a series (like Newman/Byrne's USSA stories) of occasional stories.

Sorry for moaning. I really do enjoy reading *IZ*. Keep up the good work, but don't stand still. Always ask where you can go next — and look beyond that!

Mick Robb
Chelmsford

Wearing My Skin

Nicola Griffith



Coel pulled out of the parking lot, enjoying the smooth roll of the wheel under her hands, the way the Jaguar's new tyres gripped the road. Gold and red gleamed on each side of the road; the Indian summer was sighing to a close but the sky was a hard arcing blue and the sun made the inside of the car hot. She rolled down the window and put her foot down, leaving the ad agency behind. She loved Fridays.

A mile down the slow curve of Peachtree Industrial, she touched a button and the smooth voice of Ella Fitzgerald slid like cool cream under the leather seats:

*...we're so close
you're wearing my skin,
it's my smile you're smiling
my bones within...*

The phone sliced through the music. Coel eased off the gas, and the volume.

"This is Coel Roberts." She manoeuvred the car around a sharp bend. "Who? Doctor what?" Her foot eased off the gas even further. "Doctor Lisker?"

The voice on the other end spoke more and the Jaguar swerved and juddered to a halt. Ella sang on.

Coel switched off the music, then the engine, still listening to the voice on the other end of the phone.

"My what? I don't have a..." She listened. "Yes. Yes of course I'll come."

She dropped the phone back into its cradle and stared blankly through the windshield at the road curving out of sight into the trees. She was no longer alone in the world.

Dr Nadine Lisker met her in the lobby of the Georgia State Facility for the Criminally Insane. In her early thirties, Coel judged, about four years older than herself. Her hair was

very dark brown, almost black, held away from her face with a silver clip in the shape of a stylized butterfly. Not cheap.

"This way, Ms Roberts." Her voice was pleasant, full. It echoed a little around the hard spaces of Reception.

"Coel," she corrected quietly, avoiding the echo. "I would like to see her."

"I'd rather you didn't meet her just yet. Though you can see her." They stepped through an ordinary looking white door.

It was a small room. The far wall was glass. Beyond the glass was another room, brightly lit and unfurnished. A woman sat cross-legged on the floor, reading a paperback.

"Your sister, Katherine Bernadette Macalley."

Coel knew Lisker was watching for her response; she said nothing.

"I'll leave you alone with her for a while."

The door closed. Coel walked up to the glass, her feet silent on the thick carpet. The woman on the other side continued to read; a two-way mirror, then. Coel laid a hand against the glass.

"Katherine." Her whisper was sucked away by the air conditioning.

The room smelled new, antiseptic. Against the wall opposite the door was a desk, complete with computer terminal and surveillance monitor; there was a phone, and two office chairs. Coel pulled one over to face the glass and sat down. Her legs still shook.

Katherine turned a page, chewed on her finger. Coel recognized the habit; it was her own. Katherine was wearing jeans and her hair was cut short, but in all other respects she was an identical copy of herself: wide mouth, slightly crooked; mid-brown hair with a tendency to part on the left; small hands; hazel eyes.

The glass was cool against her fingertips. She lifted her hand away and shook her head. Katherine. Something inside slotted into place for the first time in thirty years.

Katherine.

When the door opened, she turned reluctantly. Dr Lisker put two plastic coffee cups and a manila folder on the desk.

"It's not very good coffee, but I thought you might want something anyway. Since you came straight from work."

Coel became conscious of her high heels and makeup, the way the seam of her stockings ran up the back of her legs and disappeared underneath grey pinstripe. She touched her hair, realized that Dr Lisker would recognize it as an automatic checking gesture, and was angry.

"If you feel you had the right to invade my privacy, and Katherine's, to the extent that you search out both her adoption records and mine, you could at least have informed me of the situation before now."

"Katherine was admitted in a disturbed state last night. I was called in only fourteen hours ago. At four this morning."

Now she could see the faint circles under

Lisker's eyes, the way her shoulders drooped.

"When questioned about her next of kin, she could only say she had a twin. She had no evidence and, frankly, I was inclined to disbelieve her. But she became...insistent. Eventually, just to satisfy myself, I ran an initial search—for which she gave permission. I was surprised to find you did exist. We traced you as soon as we could. We haven't even had time to inform Katherine."

Coel watched the surface of her coffee tighten into wrinkles. "When will you?"

For the first time, Lisker hesitated. "I'm not sure. She's been quiet so far. I'd rather not disturb her again right now."

Coel turned to look at the woman behind the glass who was still reading. They had that in common too. Perhaps they read the same books.

"Tell me about her," she said. Lisker tilted her head to one side. "Anything. Who she was. Is. What she does for a living. How she came to be here."

Lisker reached for the manila folder. Coel laid her hand on it.

"No. Just tell me. Please."

The Jaguar whipped through the night, through a sheath of soft black velvet sequined with lights. Orff soared in endless Latin cycles from the speakers, shaving slivers of whispery phrase from her memory, dropping them into her mouth until she thought she would choke:

"Then she called over the woman from the next apartment..."

...with an electric carving knife..."

...four dead..."

...is, or was, a freelance illustrator..."

Then all the whispers shrivelled, leaving one hard, lucid sentence:

"She's been quiet, behaving well within all the normal parameters ever since admission, except she insists that her twin will understand why she did it, that her twin will forgive her."

But Coel didn't understand. She slammed the Jag into fifth and hunched back over the wheel. How could Katherine have been so certain she existed? Lisker told her that she and Katherine had been abandoned on the steps of a public library in Columbus, Ohio, but had been separated for adoption. The women who had taken them in, whom they came to call Mother, had no way of knowing that either of them had a twin. How could Katherine have known? There was no way Katherine, as a member of the public, could have used the kind of records Lisker had recourse to. How had she known?

...you're wearing my skin

it's my smile you're smiling...

In the morning she woke to find that autumn had breathed glitter on her window and the trees outside stood silent and vivid as abstract art. She shivered, remembering a dream of Nadine Lisker, and pulled her robe tight.

In the kitchen, the refrigerator rattled ice into the

tray. The Saturday quiet made her nervous as she sat at the kitchen table to eat her toast and drink tea. She carried breakfast into the living room, walking through slats of sunlight that slanted past the blinds.

The card lay where she had left it last night, leaning on the sill of the drafting table by the window, obscuring the corner of her unfinished charcoal sketch:

**Nadine Lisker, PhD, Asst. Director
Institute of Twin Studies
2013 Peachtree Road NE
Atlanta, GA 30103**

It was plain and white, not embossed. Practical. Call me if you need me, she had said. Coel picked it up, intending to tear it in two, then changed her mind; it would do well enough as a bookmark. She tucked it in her pocket and cradled her tea.

The phone rang.

At the Institute of Twin Studies, an annex of the Psychology Department, Nadine Lisker served her real coffee, in a lumpy handmade mug.

"Thank you for coming in."

Coel just waited.

"You're a rare commodity, Coel, a twin raised separately from her identical sibling. You represent an opportunity that may not come my way again for a long time."

Lisker seemed comfortable in the silence that followed. Coel broke it.

"You want to do some tests on me?"

"Ask you questions, compare your personality profile with Katherine's. This may involve filling out a few simple questionnaires."

She was not in the mood to make things easy for Nadine Lisker. "What do I get out of it?"

Lisker laughed, a light, strong laugh that surprised Coel and drew some of the tension from her shoulders. "I'll rephrase: I want your help and, in the process, I think you might learn some things that could be useful to you. Let me expand on that." She settled more comfortably in her chair. "Personality is largely genetically determined. Just how largely is debatable."

"Biology is destiny?" Coel could not keep the distaste from her voice.

"Some studies have suggested that at least fifty percent of measurable personality diversity is due to genetic diversity."

"You said 'measurable.'"

"We can accurately measure factors as diverse as attitude, alienation from society, aggression, traditionalism, aptitudes, sexuality, musical taste and self-esteem. From there we can categorize into personality types."

In the quiet Coel realized she was tapping her ring against her empty coffee cup. She put the cup down. "What are you saying?"

"That I'd like the opportunity to conduct tests; that both of us stand to gain a little knowledge if

you agree."

Coel thought of Katherine quietly reading behind the two-way mirror, constantly observed, and was afraid.

"How long will it take?"

"I'll need you for two or three hours today, then another twenty hours or so which we can schedule at your convenience."

"I'd like to see Katherine. Meet her, I mean."

"I would rather you didn't, at least for a while."

"Why?" Her voice was hard, challenging.

"I'm not being unnecessarily cruel." Lisker steepled her fingers. "Katherine is convinced that she has a twin, and clings to that belief despite the fact that she hasn't a shred of evidence. It may well be that her adoptive mother read or heard a news report on another baby, you, being abandoned, and made the connection. Katherine may unconsciously remember her mother telling her something. I need to find out."

"Why does it matter so much to you?"

Lisker looked away for a moment. "I have funding for this personality study, but I have other interests in twins that this may...pertain to."

Something in the way Lisker avoided her eyes puzzled Coel, made her think. Then she understood. "You want to study psychic bonds. Telepathy, empathy, that stuff."

Lisker looked uncomfortable. "I'd rather think of it as an unexplained method, or methods, of communication of strong emotional or physical sensations between twins."

Coel considered that. "Is it causing her distress, my not being there?"

"You saw her. She's very calm. I told her I was investigating, but that it was likely to take a few days. I thought it would."

Coel looked at the fingernails of one hand, then the other. "If it won't do her any harm, then I guess I can wait another day or two."

"That should be long enough."

"Meanwhile, I'd like to see her again." Then she surprised herself. "Every day, if that's possible."

"How about helping me with a questionnaire, then I'll take you to see her. While we're there, I'll arrange for you to visit and observe without me, at any time." And she smiled a slow smile.

The drive from the Institute to the State Facility took less than fifteen minutes. Coel followed Lisker's Toyota nose to tail.

Inside, Lisker stopped by the door to the viewing room. "You go on in. I'll take care of your visitor's permit."

Katherine was wearing green; it picked up green tints from the hazel of her eyes and emphasized the fresh pink of her cheeks. Coel wondered how they would feel against her fingertips. The skin looked so soft. She was reading again, this time a fat hardback without a dust jacket. Coel wished she could see the title, wondered if it was something she had read herself.

As Coel stepped nearer to the glass, Katherine raised her head and looked up, directly into her eyes. Coel smiled automatically, then her heart

slammed under her ribs. Katherine could not see her. Katherine could not know she was there. Then her twin sister spoke. Coel could not hear her through the glass, but the words formed by her lips were clear: *Hello. I know you're there. I knew you'd come.*

And she smiled like a satisfied six year-old receiving her birthday present, and bent her head back to the book.

Coel did not dare move, afraid that the floor might creak, or that some minute flaw in the two-way mirror might allow through a flash of movement. Afraid that Katherine might *know* she was there, might see her in some way she did not understand. Afraid.

She sucked air deep into her lungs, released it gently; sucked, released until her heart slowed a little. The muscles in her shoulders burned. Why was she so scared? Lisker must have told her, that was all. Lisker. Nothing unusual in that. Or maybe someone else had told her. Somebody had to have said something. Or perhaps Katherine was so crazy that she repeated that sentence randomly every hour or so. The sheer faith implicit in that assumption rocked her.

...we're so close...

She moved closer to the glass, until the cold unyielding surface pressed against her abdomen. The part in Katherine's hair was very slightly crooked. Gently she pushed closer: her breasts, her thighs, her right cheek; her arms, the palms of her hands. Her breath fogged the glass. Katherine. She wanted to spread herself against the slick, vitreous surface, ease herself all the way through, cell by cell, sigh up against her sister, touch cheek to cheek, thigh to thigh, mouth to mouth.

The glass was cold against her lips. She blinked. The air conditioning made her throat dry and ticklish and she coughed, reached a hand to her mouth, banged an elbow against the glass. She stepped back. The fog of her breath faded.

The wall clock told her she had stood there for over fifteen minutes.

The door opened. Lisker came in slowly, looking wary. "What happened? What did you do?"

Coel struggled between the need to push herself up against the glass, be with Katherine, and the need to pull back inside herself, neat and compact, face the enemy. She blinked. Enemy?

Lisker put a hand on her shoulder and peered at her.

"What is it? What did you do?"

"Nothing." Like a guilty schoolgirl. "Were you watching me?"

"You? No." She looked at her more closely, then steered her to a seat. "Sit down," she said in a softer voice. She took the chair next to her. "Katherine is under video surveillance around the clock. When I was talking to the security officer about your permit, I watched the monitor in her office. I saw and heard Katherine greet you."

Coel tried to sort out the emotions that twisted in

her gut: relief, that Lisker had not seen her pressing against the glass like...like a cat in heat; fear, that there was no way Katherine could have known.

"A security leak?" she managed.

Lisker shook her head positively. "She's been monitored every second she's been here. If someone told her, we'd know about it."

Monitored because she was crazy. A killer. Maybe she was going crazy too.

Nonsense. She straightened, forced a smile. "Evidence of telepathy?"

"I'll make a note of it, but we could do that over lunch. You look very pale. Food might help."

They walked six blocks to a sidewalk cafe and took a seat outside in the sun where traffic-fumed breezes gusted warmly over their skin while they looked at the menu. Lisker ordered wine for them both.

"Tell me what happened."

"Somehow she knew I was there." She sipped at her wine, wishing the glass were bigger.

"Why were you so frightened?"

"It was a shock. To think she could see me."

Her fingers tightened around the glass. The wine was very cold. "Tell me more about Katherine. Does she have a good lawyer?"

"She has a public defender, but she's refused to talk to him. She doesn't care what happens to her, she says. She's admitted the murders but won't tell us why she did it. Only that you, her twin, will understand." She paused. "Do you?"

"No. And I wish I had never heard of Katherine."

"Do you?" Lisker asked again.

Despite the tension in her shoulders, despite the fear that flexed in the pit of her stomach, there was also comfort, almost exhilaration, in the knowledge that she had a blood relative, a twin, someone who was hers, someone that nobody could take away. Family.

"Will she go to jail?"

"I doubt it. She'll be judged incompetent and assigned to a state facility for custody and treatment."

"For how long?"

"That depends," Lisker said gently. "We can't begin treatment until she decides to cooperate. Right now she's refusing to talk to any body." For a moment her frustration showed.

"She'd talk to me." The words were steady with absolute conviction.

"I can't take the risk."

"What risk? She's my twin."

"She has killed four people."

"Then tell her that you found me at least."

"You think it would make any difference?"

"I know it would."

A waitress took their orders. There was a lull in the traffic. Coel thought about what she had said. She knew it was true, but didn't know how she knew. Their fettucini came. They ate in silence.

"I'll tell her this afternoon," Lisker said suddenly. "If she reacts well I'll arrange a supervised meeting."

"Thank you." She put her fork down. "Nadine,



these other studies you mentioned, did the twins talk about physical stuff, a compulsion to be close?"

"Sometimes." Nadine hesitated. "A small percentage of subjects displayed the need to remain in close proximity to their siblings. Among these particular subjects, the correlation of both positive and negative personality traits with genetic similarity was unusually high. The incidence of unexplained communication was also much higher than average."

"So it's a bad sign, isn't it? I might go crazy, too. In fact I might already be crazy, who knows?"

"If you are crazy, it'll show up in the tests," Lisker said calmly. "If you're not, and I believe you're not, then there's no reason to suppose that you'll remain anything but a woman with extremely well-adjusted emotional and mental processes."

Coel was grateful for Lisker's blunt words; she wanted to believe every single one of them, but she wondered how it felt to be crazy, and if Katherine even knew she was insane.

When the phone rang she was curled up on the couch watching a movie she had rented on her way home from the cafe. Dark had crept into the apartment while she watched the screen; she had to fumble for the light switch behind her before she reached for the phone.

"Coel? It's Nadine, Nadine Lisker."

Coel turned off the movie. "You told her. When

do I get to see her?"

"You don't. She doesn't want to see you. Coel? Are you there?"

"Are you sure?"

"When I asked her how she felt about seeing you tomorrow, she said, 'Tell Coel she'll be hearing from me when the time is right. The time isn't right yet.'"

Blood thumped in her throat. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know. But she definitely doesn't want to see you. I suggest we leave it a while. She might change her mind."

She wouldn't. "Will you be in tomorrow?"

"I could arrange to be."

"In the afternoon? Two?"

"I'll be there. Meanwhile, try not to take her decision too personally. She's not really responsible for what she says."

Coel made a noncommittal noise and hung up.

Certainty fluttered over her skin like cold kisses: Katherine knew exactly what she was saying.

Coel refused a chair; she stood by the glass and watched Katherine. "What's she doing?"

"Tai chi."

"It's beautiful." Her voice was wistful.

"She is beautiful."

Coel turned. They held one another's gaze briefly, then Coel dropped her eyes. "Have you asked her again? About seeing me."

"Not yet. Are you sure you want me to?"

Coel did not try to explain the fierce urge she had to see her twin, to touch her, to feel her breath against her cheek. "Yes."

"Then I'll talk to her." She paused half way through the door. "I could arrange for our conversation to be run through to here, if you like."

"Thank you."

Lisker nodded and left. Coel took a seat by the desk terminal and examined it. The agency could use a new computer, one with more advanced graphics programs. Perhaps Lisker could give her some advice.

Something made her look up. Katherine was standing up against the glass, looking at her. She tried to stay calm. There was no way her twin could really see her, or know she was there. She stared back, tried to laugh at herself. Katherine could not see her. Defiantly, she waved.

Katherine smiled. Her teeth were very even.

She felt sick, the kind of gut-squeezing sick that hits before a college exam, or an interview. The air she breathed was slick and heavy; it slid down her throat as if it were muscular, alive. She would not panic.

"What do you want?"

Katherine just smiled and turned away, back into a tai chi stance.

Coel struggled to breathe, wondered if she was going to vomit. She needed a drink of water.

Her legs were rubbery with adrenalin; the tiled corridor seemed to undulate under her and her footsteps sounded hard, alien. The water fountain was outside the women's bathroom. The sound of her gulping echoed off the walls. In the restroom, she looked at herself in the mirror. She was pale and sweating, shivering. Perhaps she was in shock. Food.

Out on the street, she found a vending machine and dropped in two quarters. The fig bar was sticky and stale, but she managed to get down a few bites. She leaned against a wall and tilted her face to the sunshine; she did not want to go back in there.

But what was there to be scared of? It was coincidence, that was all. And even supposing, for the sake of argument, Katherine had seen her, somehow, why should that scare her so much? She was in no danger. She pushed herself away from the wall and straightened up.

She opened the door to the sound of voices. They were tinny, coming from the ceiling. Katherine and Lisker moved their lips to the sound. It was like watching a movie in a theatre where the volume was turned up too loud.

"...waiting to see you," Lisker was saying.

"I haven't changed my mind, Nadine."

"But why? After insisting that I track her down?"

"I'm very grateful, Nadine, as I've already said. But I no longer find it necessary or desirable to see Coel."

The sound of her own name from those lips thrilled up her spine. She missed part of the next sentence.

"...what she looks like, I know how she will

smell. I know what she thinks, I even know how she feels right this minute." Katherine looked straight through the glass at Coel. "I will come to her in my own time."

The words were gentle but Coel felt as though Katherine had reached into her stomach and was squeezing it gently. The edges of her vision went a hollow dark red.

Katherine turned back to Lisker. "You'd better go to her. She doesn't feel well."

Lisker looked uncertainly at the glass, her gaze missed Coel by several feet. Katherine laughed. Like her voice, her laugh was very gentle. She gestured toward the door. "I think you'll have another patient before long, Doctor. But by the time that happens, you won't have to worry about me."

Lisker handed Coel the glass of water, let her take another sip. "Better?"

Coel nodded. "Thank you." She drank some more. "I don't know what's the matter with me. I just...felt dizzy."

"Let me drive you home."

"My car..."

"I'll drive your car, take a cab back."

Coel found it strange to sit in the passenger seat. She was closer to the trees, to the kerb. There were all kinds of different grasses growing by the road; the sun streamed through the clouds and caught the fur of a squirrel as it ran along a branch.

Nadine drove carefully, always checking the mirror, never taking the Jag more than five miles over the speed limit; Coel wondered if it was because of the car. After a Toyota it would feel big, a wild carnivore after a tabby cat.

Nadine's hands moved competently enough over the wheel; the gear changes were smooth. Coel realized that it wasn't the car that Nadine was taking care of, but her. She couldn't decide if she was glad or annoyed.

"I'm feeling much better now."

Nadine did not take her eyes off the road but their speed increased imperceptibly. "Good. How about a little music?" She glanced at the cassette player, pushed in the tape that was already there.

...you're wearing my skin

it's my smile you're smiling...

"Not that." Coel punched it out. "Sorry, I've just heard that one once too often."

She found a Nina Simone tape, pushed it in without checking to see which one it was.

...I want you right now

I don't care if you're not ready

and, oh, I don't care how...

The white line hissed beneath their wheels. Coel opened herself to the heat of the clarinet and the slow beat of the drums.

"Right or left at this intersection?"

"Oh. Right."

Nadine pulled smoothly into the lot and cut the engine. The engine ticked in the silence.

"Thank you." Then, impulsively: "I like the way you drive."

Nadine grinned. Coel smiled back, found that

once she started, she couldn't stop.

The cab would be half an hour. They took coffee into the living room where they sat facing each other on the couch. A shoal of early afternoon sunlight swam across Nadine's thigh as she leaned forward.

"How are you feeling now?"

"Better. But puzzled. What did she mean, 'I'll come to you in my own time?'"

"I don't know, but she won't be going anywhere for a long time. It was what she said later that disturbs me. 'By that time, you won't need to worry about me,'" she repeated slowly. "I wonder if she might try to harm herself." She frowned. "I don't know. And I should know. It's my job to know. Katherine just won't let me in."

"Could she? Harm herself, I mean."

"There's nothing she could use, no belt or tie, no sharp edges, the light bulb is recessed. And she's under constant observation."

"But?"

"I don't know." Nadine ran her fingers through her hair and sighed. "I'll check on her before I leave there this afternoon, and leave a message that the night staff should be especially watchful. There's not much else I can do."

"Do you always work Sundays?"

"When I need to. More often than I'd like. You?"

"Strictly Monday to Friday at the advertising agency. I treasure my weekends."

"You never bring work home with you?" She nodded over at the drafting table by the window.

"My hobby." She felt shy. "Would you like a look?"

In the last ten years no one but her mother had seen her work. She hovered by Nadine's shoulder when she stood to look at the unfinished sketch. It was a woman sitting on a bed in a robe, leaning forward and clipping her toenails. The expression on her face was serious, intent. An utterly private moment.

"It's good."

Coel felt pleased and embarrassed. "Well..."

"It's good," Nadine repeated firmly. "I can't paint or draw myself, but I know good work when I see it. Do you work in any other medium?"

"Acrylic, inks, monoprints."

A car honked. The taxi.

"I'd like to look at them sometime." Nadine put her coffee cup on the table. At the door she touched Coel's arm. "Are you sure you'll be all right?"

"Yes." She did feel better.

She stayed by the door and watched Nadine walk across the parking lot to the taxi. A breeze caught a strand of her hair and tugged it over the butterfly clasp; Coel wanted to call out, say something more. She rested her forehead against the door frame and watched Nadine climb into the car and drive away.

Inside, she went back to the drawing board. It was good. She picked up her charcoal.

Two hours later she straightened. The light was beginning to fade. She wiped her hands down her jeans. Her stomach grumbled. She pulled the blinds closed and padded over to the kitchen. Five-thirty.

The refrigerator light made her blink. Nothing inside really appealed. She hefted out the wine and drew the cork. She'd eat later.

There was nothing much on TV. She watched a programme about the devastation of the equatorial rain forests until it began to depress her. She pointed the remote, stood up restlessly. What was Katherine doing right now? She imagined her twin smiling at her gently, and mouthing *You'll know soon enough*. She shook her head. Maybe another glass of wine would help.

Halfway to the refrigerator, the phone rang.

"Coel? It's Nadine. Just thought I'd call and see how you were."

"Fine. Fine." She laughed self-consciously. "Bored, actually."

"Sundays can be like that. I've nothing planned myself." A pause. "How about dinner?"

The restaurant was one Nadine had suggested, one that served wholefoods as well as the usual steak-chicken-fish selection. Nadine was waiting. There were fresh cut flowers in a vase in the centre of the white tablecloth. Coel ordered a glass of house white with her salad. Nadine had some kind of beer. She noticed Coel looking at it.

"It's Dutch. This is the only place I know of that serves it."

They ate their salad and bread, ordered tuna steaks to follow, and talked of politics, the weather, work.

"There are all kinds of theories about twins. Some people even go so far as to suggest that what happens to one twin is likely to happen to another."

"Surely you don't believe in predetermination."

"Not as such. But I've been going through the case histories. It's fascinating." Nadine leaned forward. Her hair was swept to one side; the light softened it to chocolate and caramel. "Things do seem to happen more often than coincidence might account for. One gets appendicitis, so does the other, one gets crippled in a hit and run, so does the other, one gets fired from his job, so does the other."

"Are you serious?"

"It happens over and over but, no," she grinned, "I don't really believe it, not seriously."

"So how come you got interested in twins in the first place?" Coel asked between mouthfuls.

Nadine's eyes were bright. "I used to be a twin myself. Ruth died when we were in college."

"Jesus." Coel reached for her glass and drained it. "I'm sorry. Jesus." She had only known of Katherine's existence for two days and already there was some kind of bond. It might not be a comfortable one, but it was there. She could not imagine what it would like to lose a twin after eighteen or nineteen years together.

"How old were you? Were you at the same college? I'm sorry, that's a dumb question to ask. I just don't really know what to say."

Nadine tried to smile. Coel reached out for her hand.

"I really am sorry."

"We were...close." They were quiet for a while. Nadine finished her beer, looked at Coel's empty glass. "A refill?"

By the time their drinks arrived, she seemed to have recovered her composure. "So, how did you get into the advertising business? What tempted you from a career as an artist?"

"Money," Coel said calmly. "We didn't have much when I was growing up. I don't like being poor. And there's no way you can make a living in fine art. Not creating it anyway. There's just no money unless you become fashionable."

"Do you ever regret the decision?"

Coel considered that. "No, not really. This way I get to make money and paint when I feel like it. Though," she continued slowly, "I seem to spend less and less time on my own work every year." To Nadine she had articulated something she had not realized before, and it bothered her.

The conversation moved on to other things. They did not mention Katherine once.

They split the bill; Coel insisted on paying the tip.

Outside, the night was cool and soft. They walked to the parking lot together. The stars were bright.

Coel stood by the door of her car. "That was a lovely evening. Thank you." She hesitated. "I have a big day at work tomorrow, or I'd invite you for coffee."

"Next time, then."

They said good-bye without touching. On the drive home, Coel played more Nina Simone.

Coel did not get time to think of Nadine, or Katherine, until late Monday afternoon when the meetings were over and she was at her desk drawing a storyboard to tempt the director of their latest cosmetics account. She had no particular ideas, and let her pen follow its own path; often, her best ideas came in these moods.

She looked at what she had so far: a woman bending over a sleeping form, her face satisfied, but anticipatory. It could work. Manufacturers always liked cosmetics linked with seduction. She looked more closely at her sketch.

The woman was Katherine.

It could just be herself... No, it was Katherine. That smile.

She pushed the paper away. Tiny dust motes danced in the sunlight. She picked up the phone and dialed.

"Dr Nadine Lisker, please. Yes, I'll hold." She pulled the sketch toward her again and wondered who the figure in the bed represented. "Hello? She's not? Then I'd like to leave a message. Tell her I called and...no, just tell her I called."

The office seemed too small and hot. It was almost five. She could always come in early tomorrow.

She walked briskly through the corridors and instead of using the elevator took the stairs two at a time. It felt good to move quickly, to do something





with all that tension that hummed through her body. She hated meetings.

It was not until she reached the parking lot that she realized the sketch was still in her hand. She folded it and stuffed it in her pocket. She had forgotten her jacket. She slung her purse into the back of the car and shrugged. It could wait until tomorrow.

The Nina Simone tape was still in the deck. Coel turned it up loud and concentrated on taking every curve tight and making every gear change at high revs. The Jaguar roared and bellied down, sinking its claws into the road. Coel laughed and let out the leash a little further.

A long straight stretch. The Jaguar's roar tightened to a scream; Coel took the volume control gently between finger and thumb, turned it all the way up, and let the hot animal she rode have its head. In the driving mirror her eyes shone as though backlit, the way she knew Katherine's would.

A memory of Nadine's hands cradling the wheel so carefully made her glance at the speedometer. She was doing 105. Sweat burst from her skin and wormed down her back. She eased her foot onto the brake. The Jag growled as she downshifted and took the curve.

She turned the tape off, and all the rest of the way home she kept to the speed limit.

In the apartment she prowled like a nervous cat. She took the sketch from her pocket and stared at it. It was definitely Katherine, Katherine looking smug; the seduction, the suasion, was complete. But of whom? Who was the figure in the bed?

She threw the paper on the floor in frustration. Why could she not get Katherine out of her head? She glared at the sketch, then smiled. She would

draw a full length sketch of Katherine. By the time she finished that, her twin would be the last thing she wanted to think about. It was the same principle she used to loosen tight muscles: tense them as much as she could, then relax, tense then relax.

She worked rapidly with a wide graphite stick. Katherine took shape. She sketched her as she had last seen her, as she wanted to remember her: graceful and strong in a tai chi posture that resembled some long-legged bird settled and serene after a long flight.

After a few minutes, she took her wine from the refrigerator and filled a glass at the table. She sipped as she worked, filling her glass more than once.

At eleven she had to stop. She blinked, trying to ease her sore eyes. The bottle was empty. Fatigue hit her in a soft wobbly wave. Bed. After she turned the lights out, the last she remembered was Katherine smiling at her and mouthing words without sound: *It's time, Coel. I'm coming for you.*

Coel had no idea how long the phone had been ringing. It was still dark and there was a foul taste in her mouth. Her head felt hot and heavy. The green glow of her clock told her it was four in the morning.

"Hello?"

"Coel, it's Nadine."

Coel's knuckles whitened in the sickly glow of the clock. Katherine. "Tell me."

"She's dead. She killed herself." Coel thought of all the close observation, the precautions. "She bit through her tongue and choked on it."

Fear breathed, hot and fetid, in her face. Katherine was free now, free to come for her. She remembered the sketch, Katherine leaning over a figure in bed. She dropped the phone and hit the light switch. There was no one there; everything was normal. A thin, tinny sound came from the receiver on the bed. Coel picked it up.

"...okay? Coel? Coel!"

"I'm here, I'm fine." She spoke through a long roaring tunnel; dark waited for her at the other end. "Thank you for letting me know. I'll call you in the morning."

She put the phone down, engaged the answering machine and turned off the light. The glow from the clock irritated her; she unplugged it. Soft, warm dark nuzzled her skin. Katherine was coming.

She woke two hours later. The sun was already up; she felt strange, heavy-limbed and light-headed. The apartment looked subtly different, as if the walls were smaller and the windows bigger, the colours brighter than they had been. She swung her legs out of bed and stood. The rug felt coarse and scratchy.

In the living room, she pulled open the blinds. The empty wine bottle still sat next to her sketch. It was finished. But the subject, the woman poised and graceful in her tai chi stance, was not Katherine. It was herself: the hair was longer; she wore the side-fastening shirt that hung in her own

closet.

In an effort to shake off her lethargy, she took a shower. Her hair was tangled; more than once while she combed it, she caught a knot. Perhaps she should get it cut.

She stood in her closet and stared at her work clothes. The thought of being trapped in that office all day closed her throat with fear. No, she would not go to work. She would stay home, have a drink, maybe two, until this terrible blankness went away, until she could weep.

At the store she bought six bottles of Beringer and two bags of corn chips. They did not have any Dutch beer, so she bought German. She supposed they were similar.

Back at the apartment, she put on the Ella Fitzgerald tape, opened the chips and pulled the cork from the first bottle.

*you're wearing my skin
it's my smile you're smiling,
my bones within...*

The Beringer was cold and delicate on her tongue. She let it roll around her mouth, wetting every pink surface, before she swallowed. The chip was crisp and salty. Ella sang on. She drank deliberately, filling each glass to precisely same level as the last.

By early afternoon she was halfway down the third bottle; she had turned the Ella Fitzgerald tape eight times. She was well aware she was drunk, or should be, but she walked steadily from sound system to refrigerator to kitchen counter for the chips. Her world had shrunk and curved into a perfect sphere that encompassed the living room and the kitchen, a bubble where everything was bright and shiny and meaningless, where feelings bobbed out of sight like high-altitude balloons.

The air in her bubble shuddered. Someone was knocking on the door. They would go away.

They did not. She stood up and went to the door. The handle fitted her palm beautifully: like the head of a cat wanting to be stroked. She twisted it.

"I knew you'd come," she said to Nadine. She smiled. "I bought you some beer."

"I called several times, but your machine was on."

"Oh. Yes."

"So then I called the ad agency. They said you hadn't been in, or left a message. I got worried."

"I'm fine. Drunk maybe, but fine." She wandered into the kitchen. "Perhaps you'd like to join me. A beer?"

"Coel, will you sit down?"

"In a minute. Do you want a beer?"

"Yes, I'll have a beer. No, don't bother with a glass."

Coel followed her to the couch. Nadine looked at the empty bottles without comment before sitting down next to her. She put her arm around Coel's shoulders.

"Coel, honey, how are you really?"

"I feel fine." She blinked at the concern in Nadine's eyes. "No, actually, I don't feel anything. Except numb. Numb and cold." Nadine's arm

tightened around her shoulders and she rested her head against Nadine's breast. "That feels good. You take some of the coldness away." She lifted her head. "Is this how you felt, when Ruth died?"

Nadine was silent. Coel felt the muscles in the arm around her tense as Nadine withdrew inside herself; then, abruptly, the arm relaxed. "When Ruth died I felt as though someone had taken the world and twisted it through ninety degrees until there was no longer any way I could touch it. I felt like someone had their hands over my eyes, over my ears, that there were gloves on my fingers. Everything was dulled. After a while, it felt like this same person took me and twisted me to fit back into the world. It felt like every bone was popped from its socket and my skin had been ripped off. Everything got through. Anything—someone smiling, a dog whining—made me weep. I couldn't shut anything out." Coel listened, trying to understand. "After a while I developed this obsession that I should have been killed instead of Ruth. It took me a long time to get over that. A vital part of me was gone. Ruth was gone."

Coel absorbed that. Unlike Nadine, the emotion she was avoiding was not grief, but fear. "How was she killed?"

"She was murdered. Stabbed to death in her own home."

The fear that had floated over her head all day bumped gently against her bubble. "Did they catch whoever did it?"

"Her lover did it."

Fear split her bubble, spiking her skull down her throat red and sharp to her stomach. Vomit humped up into her mouth and she ran for the bathroom.

Over the toilet she heaved and heaved until her back and stomach and ribs ached.

"This might make you feel better." Nadine held out a glass of water that was already frosting and beading. She slid her arm under Coel's and helped her to a sitting position. She held the glass while Coel sipped. "Can you hold it?" She found some tissue and wiped Coel's face. "Feeling better?" She flushed the toilet. "Best place for all that alcohol."

Coel looked at herself in the mirror, seeing Katherine eat up her bones, Katherine smile back at her from within. "You have to drink at a wake," she said.

"An Irish wake? A wake for Katherine?"

A fat tear rolled down Coel's cheek and burst plumply on the back of her hand. "A wake for me," she whispered. "Don't you see, a wake for me. And then for you."

Because finally she understood. Katherine had come, and Nadine had come, and what happened to one twin often happened to another. Here. Soon.

Nicola Griffith wrote "Song of Bullfrogs, Cry of Geese" (*Interzone* 48) and a couple of earlier stories for us. She comes from Yorkshire but currently lives in Georgia, USA. Her first novel has been accepted by Grafton Books, and she has also contributed three original fantasy stories to the GW Books "Warhammer" anthologies.

Mutant Popcorn

Film Reviews by Nick Lowe

In Britain, we're easily and traditionally cynical about the studio way of doing things. Fact: Hollywood is entirely populated by Stepford people on the end of phones who wouldn't know a creative idea if it savaged them in the throat. Fact: every script with the slightest hint of distinctive flavour and texture is chewed, homogenized, digested, and sterilized to come out like processed cheese. Fact: there are living, apparently humanoid creatures out there who genuinely believe that the three-act model of screenplay is the revealed word of the prophet, and if you can't put a page number from 1 to 120 on every scene on screen then your script needs ritual fixing. Fact: federal law imposes a height limit on all concepts, so that no original premise is permitted that cannot be summarized in one sentence of no more than twelve words (at least one of which must be "grow," "find," or "succeed"). Hah! we bark. What a load of pupkins. No wonder all they can make is sequels and ripoffs. Can you imagine a proper British picture ever stooping to a sequel? — *Henry V Part II? The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and a Little Lady?*

You do increasingly run into an alternative view. It's terribly cool at the moment to admire the professional face of Hollywood, the view of film as business. In the *Premiere*-led new-chic perception of films and filming, it's become kind of gauche to be interested in surface stuff like whether particular movies are good or bad.

What matters for the nineties filmo is less the films themselves than the true-life comedy of capitalism played out in their makings and takings: the deals, the packages, the politics, the disasters within and behind the product. Subscribers to this mythos, which is probably more dim than actually dangerous, think the studio system is really rather fabby. By contrast, all Brit films are *a priori* dead on their feet, because we don't know how to party, can't hack a tight script with Structure and Conflict to save our miserable lives, and above all

we're far too embarrassed about the perfectly natural act of spending enormous money on brightly-coloured junk. And this is why the most pathetic and cringeable thing in the entire galactic rim is when the Brits try to mimic the funky, unashamed Hollywood way for themselves.

Expect we'll be hearing a lot of this as the *Robin Hood* wars break. The already overfamiliar tale of the studio politics behind this ill-omened face-off is a gift to the new film mag journalism, and the finished products look like playing right into its lap. Despite the hand of Hollywood names behind both, and despite pretty comparable levels of local input on screen, there's not much doubt which is the "British" and which the "Hollywood" version. Compared with the upcoming Costner *Prince of Thieves* vehicle, John Irvin's *Robin Hood* has the cheaper stars, the thinner-spread production values, and the name of a worthy UK production indie interposing between John McTiernan and the actual commodity. They may have bagged the title and stolen a march in the release schedules, but everything else about this production has "plucky British loser" stamped all over it. The direly unimaginative script is full of amateurish clichés and ineptiae that a closer studio involvement would surely have purged.

To claim your souvenir feather from Big Chief I-Spy, simply tick off one drawbridge stunt escape, one Sundance cliffjump, and one of those archery contests where the local lad already scores a bullseye and then our hero caps him by splitting the well, see *Iliad* xxiii.850-83, since when it hasn't got any younger. There are dialogue lines that inflict forms of pain both long-forgotten ("One more smart remark and I'll —", full stop) and hitherto unimaginated (Uma Thurman, trying terribly hard: "I will take this man because he makes the may tree blossom and the bees buzz in my breast"; exchange of puzzled looks among crowd of ex-



tras). In part counterbalance, there's some stirring socialist input from ingenious John McGrath — Saxon underclass nationalism against authoritarian Norman overlords, criminalization of the oppressed working class, &c., &c. — and some uniquely homegrown touches of pure Britishness in the twin themes of "bog off you Frenchie bastards with your constipated accents and your ripoff farm subsidies" and "what bloody awful miserable weather in this godforsaken squelching greenwood hey nonny." Most British of all, the whole cast look persistently damp and embarrassed throughout, only too well aware that both of England's historical superheroes were killed off by Python two decades back, and to bring them back now would take the kind of shameless oblivion to history and tradition of which only true Hollywood is capable. Maybe with Brian Blessed, a dafter script, and a more expensive fight arranger *Robin Hood* could have been a contender. But not like this.

On the whole, if readers seem refreshingly uninterested in the whole cinenationalist disgruntle. You'd expect us to like films that do what the best sf wordies do: expand our sense of human and cosmic con-

text, by whapping us round the heads with a blitz of brightly-coloured cognitive estrangement. In fact, we don't really do this. We actually tend to feel, sometimes against the critical consensus, that "thoughtful," "European" sf movies of the *Friendship's Death* sort are pretty dopey, and that the genre is much better served by a well-made, witty and lurid Verhoevenesque action comedy. Part of the reason for this attitude, I think, is that we take it for granted, as a matter of common sense, that *all* film is intrinsically less interesting and versatile than the written word. In particular, sf on film is not primarily a medium of reasoned ideas, and looks very silly when it tries to be. The best any mass-audience fantasy film can hope to deliver is a smart, ironic, speedy entertainment with evocative background textures and a good sense of genre. So long as these conditions are met, we're really prepared to be very tolerant of nonsense.

I bring this up because I can't remember a film that has provoked the same kind of anger, contempt, and sense of almost personal insult amongst ordinary sf consumers than the otherwise widely-tolerated *Highlander II: The Quickening*. It goes without saying, of course, that this movie is a horrible, stupid mess, easily the most inept travesty of big sf cinema in the decade so far. But it's not immediately self-evident why it should be this particular film that leaves so many of us wanting to punch out the cinema manager on our way back through the foyer. It's not *that* incompetently shot or performed (Lambert's Brando pastiche inevitably excepted), and there's at least one really quite good gag sequence in the airline-safety-video sketch, for all it seems to have been grafted in from a different movie. But the original *Highlander* was so blissfully daft in every department that nobody could go into a followup with any illusions. How much worse can worse be?

Well, stuffing the first picture down the u-bend was obviously one mistake. *H2* is constructed on the assumption that what was good about *Highlander* was Lambert, Connery, and the swordstuff, when of course nobody could give half a toss for any of the above. The real charm of *Highlander* was all those superpowered Scotsmen running around the world for 500 years trying to chop one another's heads off, and it's really very unfortunate that this amiably goofy concept seems to be the one thing *II* finds embarrassing enough to trash altogether. So now - what a tur-

nup! — we find actually they *weren't Scotsmen at all*, but reincarnated aliens banished from "the planet Zeist, 500 years ago" (where they just happened to have names like Conor McLeod. Give us a break, lads). At the same time, all the really dumb plot rules stay, except they now have to be vastly revised and extended to give Michael Ironside a shot. Did we say the Prize at the end of film 1 was becoming mortal? Ah, well, actually there was a choice of Prizes, and the second was returning to Zeist, but it didn't seem worth mentioning at the time. And you don't have to *stay* mortal if you can decapitate a Zeistian assassin on Earth, and if you can get two you get Connery back as a freebie. And you're only immortal here, not on Zeist, except apparently if you're a grinning maniac whose idea of a power lunch is to crush eels with his bare hands. One can only hope Virginia Madsen's agent cut her a good deal for the speech where she has to summarize this drivel back over.

Amazingly, even with all this baggage, the plot still has to make up new rules *ad hoc* to get out of scrapes. "My time here izh ended," announces Connery out of the blue as his contract runs out in the middle of a scene, and to the bafflement of audience and co-stars alike his hand suddenly starts playing "Amazing Grace" on synthesized bagpipes at the rotating knives. "Will I see you again?" manages the bemused Lambert. "Mebbe." (You must be joking, shonny.) In fact, despite the most cumbersome apparatus of arbitrary plot rules in fantasy film history, this shambling beast still manages to lumber on from one genre setpiece to the next in virtual asyndeton, fetching up with a textbook duel to the death in an elevated place with the imperilled heroine dangling off the sidelines. Dumb plotting we can take; duff plotting is a deathly abuse of our willingness to forgive.

But the other thing that marks *The Quickening* off from many a rival is its stupendously bad sense of milieu. It's quite a conceptual challenge to imagine a 2024 where they still have Queen on the jukebox, and indeed still have jukeboxes; where the New York subway still operates 1970s rolling stock, and hip people say things like "excellent threads, dude." It's even harder to grasp how Ironside can quip learnedly about *The Wizard of Oz* on his first jaunt to Earth; while some of the ozonological news sets daring new challenges to the imagination. "In Africa, where shelter from the sun is almost nonexistent,

people are dying in their thousands." (What of? and what happened to all their homes, clothes, and hours of darkness, not to mention the trees, rocks, and other landscape features presently to be found in several locations on the continent?)

Fact is, there's nonsense and there's insulting nonsense. We'll put up with a lot of pretty idiot stuff in the name of genre economy, but nobody tells us we're too dim to tell the difference between sf and BD. Brian Clemens, who a very long time ago was the greatest screenwriter on earth, and Russell Mulcahy, who once seemed a chap who deserved to get work, should think seriously about holy orders. These people's talent seems to have been abducted by aliens. Given the choice, I'm sure we'd rather watch a movie that pushed enthusiastically at the envelope of sense than one that, like *Robin*, played a safe straight bat throughout. But even nonsense has its own interior logic. *Highlander II* is just burbling from the hindbrain, a sad reminder of what can happen when a tightly-controlled studio package passes into the hands of an ill-disciplined European independent. With luck and justice, we won't see its like again.

(Nick Lowe)

Tube Corn TV Reviews by Wendy Bradley

I really miss *The Listener*. None of the other weekly magazines quite fills the gap and engages with the world of broadcasting and television in the same critical spirit. It seemed to me a piece of almost criminal negligence on the part of television—and particularly the BBC's — management that they couldn't find the money and the will to keep the old *Listener* going, particularly in view of the numerous tawdry niche magazines related to programmes that the BBC now keep on producing and plugging. If television itself cannot treat its own programmes seriously, how can it expect the viewer? Television criticism in newspapers has always been, largely, confined to humorous point-scoring and salacious star-spotting and yet it never seems to have occurred to television that there is still no equivalent to *What the Papers Say* or *Film 91* looking intelligently at television output

on television itself. There is always *Right to Reply*, of course, but this, although well worth its slot, is more of a grievance and response feature than a critical evaluation. *Points of View* I will spare commentary since I find it so patronizing as to be literally unwatchable.

I make no apology, then, for looking critically at a programme which was broadcast at the beginning of May 1991 and which you may well by now have forgotten, since it seems to me there is no critical apparatus in place to enable the audience to engage with a programme after it has been broadcast and we no longer even have the option of reading and commenting on a transcript in *The Listener*. Horizon's **Colonizing Cyberspace** was neither extraordinarily good nor extraordinarily bad; it was neither topical enough to warrant news coverage nor significant enough to merit arts coverage in the papers. It was not commercial enough to be likely to have survived if it had had to fight for airspace on a commercial network, nor was it either significant or sycophantic enough to have been likely to attract either an altruistic or commercial sponsor. It was good but not great; met each of the BBC's responsibilities, to inform, educate and entertain, but did not fully discharge any of them; and in place of the *Listener* article it deserved, now merited only the bald offer of a £2 transcript. It was good, quality, television: an endangered species.

Although the programme's title referred to "cyberspace" the programme itself referred to "virtual reality": bombarding your body with stimuli which will make it believe it is inside a computer-generated space rather than the space it actually inhabits. Three dimensional computer-generated graphics and sound can appear to wrap around the viewer because he (I will come to the pronoun later) is wearing twin screens and headphones and navigating his way around this "virtual" world by use of either a joystick or "dataglove" — a glove fitted with sensors which tell the computer where in the computer-generated "world" the gloved hand is pointing.

This is not exactly William Gibson, and it was noticeable that the less wide-eyed of the participants in the programme were clear about the limitations of current "virtual" worlds. Michael Frayn was co-opted, as the non-genre author of a book which dealt with something more or less similar, to try on a visor and joystick set and describe the virtual world in

which he found himself. His initial gee-wow reaction was quickly tempered by the realization that it was a very simple "world" he was visiting; a child's storybook illustration, all clean lines and blocks of primary colour.

Computer graphics themselves are now a commonplace (remember *Tron*?) and one of the strengths of this *Horizon* was the use made of computer graphics both as signposts to direct the viewer through the shape the programme was taking and as two dimensional representations of what, we were to assume, were the images those within the virtual world were seeing in three dimensions. Yet there was a pointed reminder that, as we watched a computer generated forest unroll before us, for us to engage with such a complex image and "virtually" walk under its branches turning in any direction we chose, would require computing power of an order which simply does not exist (all right, does not yet exist). The use of the dataglove was explained by someone wearing a dataglove and proudly flexing its fingers — but this was undercut by having the "virtual" image the computer was making of his hand superimposed onto the frame so that we could see for ourselves the timelags between the fingers flexing and the image moving, between the hype and the happening.

The programme's title, *Colonizing Cyberspace*, was there because those at the leading edge of this technology do indeed seem to see themselves as colonizers of another kind of frontier. This is a mythos with a peculiar hold on the imagination, that one can move into an unknown world and carve out one's own place in it — the American West, the dream of "space; the final frontier," the inner worlds of the sixties drug culture and now the other inner world of the virtual. One of the most interesting, but least pursued, ideas the programme raised was the connection between the ageing hippies of the sixties, recanting on the search for chemical frontiers and instead seeking a "clean," just-say-no, way of looking within for transcendence.

The gender balance of the programme was heavily male and there was a particularly sad diversion to look into a sixties "sensorama." This used twin film loops and stereo headphones to create a similar effect, of the viewer being within the scene, and added a vibrating seat and appropriate aromas delivered to the station from which the film loops were viewed to make the viewer believe he was driving in a sports car with a

pouting blonde or running along the seashore with her. All this technology to reinvent "What the Butler Saw," to give a 3D effect to a pneumatic belly-dancer, rather like using twenty years-worth of computer research to play Leisure Suit Larry. There was one warning female voice suggesting that it might be an idea to think through what use was going to be made of virtual reality before it became as widely available as the pocket calculator. How do we feel about putting on our headsets and wandering into cyberspace to commit a virtual murder, a virtual rape? What happens in your own imagination is your own business; but then looking at the shell-shocked faces of people emerging from 3D computer arcade games until they managed to get back into reality and say how great the game was made me wish the point had been pursued a little more strongly.

In the end, though, much of what we were being promised from cyberspace was still fiction and no-one actually pursued what was for me the biggest question: what difference does it make to a computer graphic to experience it in three rather than two dimensions? We were vaguely told that the infinite world of information is easier to grasp as image; that we might see the stock market prices as a field of wheat rippling in the economic breeze and reach out with our datagloves to grasp the sheaves and so tell our computer to buy us a million shares. This is simply metaphor, a technofix bar chart. If we haven't the cash we still won't have it in cyberspace.

Apparently, though, cyberspace is where our money is, right now. Next time you put your cashcard in the machine you are at the interface between the real and virtual worlds. Well OK, but when we climb into our covered wagons to colonize the virtual let's not forget the real. Virtually walking on the surface of the moon doesn't make up for the loss of the ability to get there for real.

Colonizing Cyberspace

P O Box 7

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Cheques for £2 payable to BSS

Pigs Mostly

Ian Lee

Heavybreasted, amid the corn, Margery Muttock stood serene, cradling a pink infant on her ample hip. She squeezed an ear of wheat between a firm fleshy thumb and forefinger and offered the damp milky residue to the bundle in her arms. A rosy tongue collected the ambrosial gift and tiny labial flutterings suggested further consideration. Questioning innocent small brown eyes looked up into Margery's face, evoking for a moment a scene of almost religious reverence. An earthmother and infant in a fertile landscape. One might have sighed at the idyll of it all. But perhaps it was not quite so... so iconographic. When you knew the whole story.

And the breeze blew across the wheat field, which shimmered like a golden sea. Mice stopped in mid-nibble, skylarks clung to imaginary aerial spires and the bees... the bees buzzed and searched and searched again, matching, coupling, mingling with the seeds in the wind. You could feel the life beginning to ripen all around. What seemed to be a smile broke over the weanling's visage, like sun from behind a cloud. Margery puckered and blew sweet breath across the tiny brow.

Turning at the distant sound of wheels rattling the cattle grid at the entrance to the farm, Margery hitched up the bundle on her hip and tucked the infant's impish little ears inside the swaddling shawl. As one does when expecting visitors, she smoothed her blue, fashionless polyester dress around her well-cushioned form. She moved to the edge of the field and onto the grass beside the track. Across the flat fields to the West, at a distance of almost a mile, across ditches, scrappy hedges, past a derelict haybarn, standing out against the dark green backcloth of Badgers Wood, Margery could see a small white car begin to make its way towards her.

She did not know it at that moment but it was a car bringing her son back from voyages in the wide world. She sighed, unwrapped her small pink armful and put it to the ground. The piglet shook itself, making its curly tail quiver with delight or irritation — it was of course impossible to tell — and then ran off with a squeal towards the farmhouse, as if being pursued by a big bad wolf.

Perverse, polymathic, poetical, Graham Muttock turned his mind from idle fictional speculation about the cosmos and eased his white Sunbeam off the metalled lane and onto the pebblestrewn, rutted track. Dust billowed up,

obscuring his line of retreat. His fingers tightened on the leathergloved steering-wheel and he peered ahead for the smoothest route across the potholes. It was a journey he had both dreamed about and dreaded for what seemed like years. Now that he was approaching the object of his quest, he found his foot begin to freeze on the accelerator. Partially dead trees hovered on the skyline, too far away to intervene. Graham caught them in the corner of his eye and heard the phrase "sticks and stones" formulate from nowhere in the uncontrollable recesses of his... of his mind. He knew it was part of some larger saying but for the moment he couldn't think what. As a journalist, that bothered him. You had to know references if you wanted to be a successful journalist. You had to know what was important and what was not. His brain was speeding up as the car had slowed. He looked in the mirror and saw only the billowing pale cloud of dust. Up ahead in the distance he spotted a substantial figure moving towards the farmhouse. It appeared to be carrying something in its arms, then bending to put that something down.

As far as Graham could remember the track was about three-quarters of a mile long. It should take five minutes at the very most and he would be there. The sign at the entrance to the track had said it and its significance had not been lost on him: "Home Farm." The other sign, however, had been noticed only unconsciously, which was not the same thing at all — far less distracting in the short term but in the long run potentially far more significant. Over a period of time the unconscious impressions would work their way to the surface and by the time they got there they would have distracted... or destroyed... everything worth worrying about. Graham was capable of poring over such thoughts for hours late at night when he was finding it difficult to sleep. The other sign — the unnoticed one — had said: "No Trespasses." Without the r. Down a few layers, some Biblical connections may have rustled in a corner. Graham didn't notice that either, as you wouldn't notice a dormouse waking from winter were in. Graham was in a state of tension and expectation. He could tell he was not quite functioning as normal but he couldn't really help himself. It wasn't every day you went to call on... biological... on ancestors... on parents.

Graham had always been a little strange. Now expectation was making his mind restless like a tossed.... salad... or like straw, yes, tossed like

straw.

There were boulders... large stones, anyway, lining the track at intervals, painted white for night visibility. They, and the smaller stones and pebbles strewn over the track, were deeply unconscious of the passing vehicle. More unconscious than Graham was of the sign that said "No Trespasses." Or the sign was of him. More unconscious than Margery of the reason for Graham's return. The stones were trying hard, but consciousness of anything beyond the immediate hard stony substance of their lives was yet far beyond them. One day perhaps they would crack and some inner force would break them down until they were earth, chemical traces of iron, calcium, magnesium oxide and so on. Then they might be drawn into the stem of a plant and live again as trace elements in that plant's sap. An ear of wheat, for example. Once eaten, they might be absorbed into the blood of an animal — a pig, perhaps — and in the iron that is necessary to the blood that runs through the brain of that animal, they might then pass on and it might be that one day these stones would... rule the world. Napoleon, thought Graham, was also a pig.

Less unconscious were the grasses, wild and cultivated, which swayed in honour of the car's passage. They could be moved by the car, or by Graham. They could have their osmotic and photosynthetic processes disturbed by the unwanted deposition of tars and lead, not to mention the momentary asphyxiation caused by the passing of the carbon monoxide cloud. The cultivated grasses, the rye, the barley, the wheat, were already weakened by the years of inbreeding and the incessant dousing of fertilizers, pesticides and acid rain. Unable to express themselves openly, they cowered away from the field edges, which remained sparse and barren like the desperate remnant-haired dome of a prematurely balding pate. Further up the evolutionary chain, hundreds of small insects became only too painfully impressed by the presence of the Sunbeam as they were buffeted by its pearly white bonnet or sucked into its discreet air intakes. Their tiny cries were too small to register on Graham's attention screen, which was focused principally on a distant figure which appeared to be leaving a field, trailing the remnants of what had been a bundle and walking towards the farmhouse.

There were birds too. They recognized the existence of the vehicle and expressed degrees of alarm about its presence. Crows and pigeons departed the trees as the droning engine and crunching tyres approached. They knew the car wasn't interested in them but something deep down, something instinctual, made them respond to certain sounds by taking flight. Whether the car reminded them of the hum of wind through the primary flight feathers of a peregrine or whether they had simply learned that the farm Land Rover sometimes gave birth to men with shotguns, the ornipsychologists had not yet revealed. They just took to the wing. They knew that in a few minutes they would have circled on the breeze to no

purpose and have returned to whatever cosy intersection of branch and bough had been supporting them. Or they might find themselves drawn to the ground by a glimpse of some potential titbit overturned by a fleeing vole. Later, other sights and sounds would cause other predictable reactions. By and large, they had consciousness but they did not have will.

A lot of this mental activity was invisible to Margery, even though she was watching closely as the car made its progress up the track. It was invisible also to a nearby hovering kestrel, even though its eyes were sharper than diamonds. And yet there was a perceptible psychic shimmer in the air around the car, a disturbance akin to the dust tail that curled around behind it. What that shimmer was, it was at this stage impossible to tell.

Margery had almost reached the end of the track by the farmyard gate. She was thinking that it must be Mr and Mrs Jones's car because it was going so slowly: those who made the journey regularly lost their fear of the potholes. Mr and Mrs Jones were the only people expected, but she had not remembered them having a white car. But then they might well have changed it. Margery peered into the distance, trying to make out who was in the car. It seemed like a small car, even a sports car perhaps and not the sort of thing to carry a young family in. As the car turned a bend in the track, aligning itself directly with her angle of vision, the frame of the windscreen appeared to Margery to contain a lone driver. Surely Mr and Mrs Jones would come together? Margery's concern deepened and she turned, breaking into a heavyish trot, hoping to find her husband in the farmyard.

Margery's husband was a large man who wore check shirts with the sleeves rolled up. His jeans were very baggy at the knees and his boots were crusted with mud and other fibrous vestiges of field and yard. He wore a cloth cap — even in the height of summer — and spoke with a broad country accent. He knew twenty five dialect words for rain and as many again to describe the act of mating, most of which were monosyllabic and had four letters incorporating a flat u. Margery's husband was called Joe. He came to her call.

They met at the gate into the farmyard. It marked the end of the track and the beginning of their private domain. It was the limit at which the dogs would bark and the security lighting would come on. At this point the slightly desultory "No Trespasses" became "Private Property — Keep Out" on a board attached to the gate. On the side wall of the house, next to the gate, was a bell-pull and another old sign: "Ring for Attention." Margery and Joe stood one on each side of the gate as Margery pointed out to Joe the billowing cloud and the Sunbeam. Trundling closer, it had covered about half the distance to where they were.

"It's not the Joneses," she said. "I've a feeling it's..." She trailed off.

Whatever feeling it was, it had suddenly been



supplanted by a new one. A look came into her eyes, a faraway look, as though she were trying to discern speech from muffled mumblings in an adjoining room. Finally the message came through.

"I think it's Graham," she said.

"How do you know? We haven't seen him for... for years."

"Mother's intuition," said Margery. "I just know."

"He's a journalist now, isn't he?" said Joe with a slight but unmistakable note of apprehension in his voice.

Margery had been thinking along similar lines already.

"An *investigative* journalist," she said, laying heavy emphasis on the specialism. "With *What Farm?* magazine. You know what that means, don't you?"

"He could be just on holiday," offered Joe, unconvincingly. "Looking for Bed and Breakfast."

"You don't believe that," said Margery scornfully. "He's been on voyages in the wide world and we've heard nothing from him for six years. You know what a strange one he is. I've always known he'd find out one day. I'd hoped to be dead first."

"Well, slow him up a bit then," suggested Joe. "We'd better get things straight and start thinking up a good story."

Margery's right hand delved sub-apronically and

as it did, almost in the same instant, the Sunbeam started to pull to the left, influenced by the sudden exhalation of air from a punctured front tyre. A row of stiletto-sharp spikes retracted silently and imperceptibly into the surface of the track.

Margery turned as soon as she had ascertained that the car was stopped and, nodding at the gate catch, waited while Joe unhitched it to let her in. Beside her, unnoticed, the small pink piglet stood uncertainly on its four meatless legs and turned round rapidly in a confused circle, as though trying to catch its own curly sprig of a tail. It rolled over a couple of times on to Margery's foot.

"Let's get you back to Mum, then," said Margery, like any nanny who was returning her charge from a morning stroll in the park. She swept the sturdy tender infant into her arms and made off through one of the shed doors that opened onto the farmyard. Inside this shed it was dark and smelly. Crumbling wooden partitions lined old straw-floored sties; chipped enamel and plastic bowls were propped in feeding troughs positioned head high to a porker and appeared to contain dregs of uneaten swill. Dung and mud had been pounded underfoot into an uninviting paste, ready for daubing on medieval cottage walls, a couple of thousand years too late.

At the far end of this shed, partially obscured by

Bending down over the crib, Margery reached in and carefully pulled back the covers from the infant.

"There, there," she said in her most comforting tones, as she had spoken to the piglet earlier when crushing the ear of wheat in the field. "Let's see if you're a little bit hungry now."

She lifted the baby up — it was dressed in a short white gown: it was a boy — and clutching it to her chest moved over to the sow and knelt on the edge of the mattress. The sow continued to look supremely unconcerned, even as Margery lowered the child on to one of the recently vacated dugs and held it firmly but gently as it latched on and began to suck for all it was worth. The sow turned her head to look, then lay down flat and closed her eyes. It was the odd one of the litter, she thought, the one with different legs and face, the one that the human sow kept separate for some reason. It was the gentle one, the one that sucked slowly without fighting and had to be helped away again.

Graham soon realized that he had a puncture. He got out and surveyed the damage. One flat tyre, squashed by the weight of the car. He looked up the track towards the farmhouse and then looked back at the car. He felt undecided for a moment about whether he should be trying to mend the tyre now or come back later when things would be clearer. His brain circled the problem a few times but could find no way in. He decided to simply walk away from it. Here he was, virtually on the doorstep of his quest for his biological origin. It was really a case of going on regardless. He went to the boot of the car and took out a small suitcase. As he closed the boot he looked wistfully towards the farmhouse and saw the figure who had been standing in the field go through a gate into the farmyard. It was clearly Margery. A man was holding the gate for her. It was Joe. Even at this distance you could see that he had large brawny forearms. As indeed did Margery.

He hadn't dared to tell them he was coming. He felt too guilty about the years of voyaging, the lack of postcards, the underlying sense of fear and strangeness that arose in his mind when his memory confronted early childhood recollections. He had read that it was quite common for children who grew up on farms to suffer traumas occasioned by the close proximity of large animals. He hadn't been sure, but eventually had found it hard to resist the suggestion that he was repressing or running away from some... some problem in his past. Something that gave rise to the difficulties he was having in hanging on to... on to his... his personality.

As he knelt down, looking wistfully towards the farmhouse, Graham was struck by a feeling of *déjà vu* so strong he became dizzy. He listened for a moment to the far off sounds of traffic, the coo-cooing of wood pigeons, the hum of bees, the passing of the breeze, the distant squeals of pigs and it seemed to him that he had been here before. Not just this place, but this moment. That tree, that

a couple of bales of straw and a casually leaning antique pitchfork, a padlocked door waited unobtrusively, expecting to be ignored by the casual visitor. Margery went to this door and opened it with a key that had appeared in her hand. The door opened remarkably easily and without creaking. The pitchfork seemed to be attached to it and opened also. Somehow the bales of straw were not in the way and Margery was able to pass unimpeded into an inner sanctum pigshed run on quite different lines. Here was fluorescent light. Here were terrazzo-lined walls and floors and stainless steel troughs and gutters. Here were taps and coloured chutes and pipes on the walls, discreet extractor vents purring in appreciation of the comfort and cleanliness. Here were thermostats and constant temperature and sprinklers and automatic floor scrubbers. There were recognizable pens along one side of the shed, separated behind a waist-high wall. And in these pens, lying on what appeared to be soft mattresses were some very svelte and contented looking pigs.

Margery went up to one of the pens and lowered the piglet she was carrying over the wall. It tottered slightly then ran over to a large Large White sow that was reclining in the corner and began immediately and with disconcerting vigour to attack one of the row of teats that hung like a fringe from the sow's underside. Margery watched the sow's expression and, satisfied that the prodigal was being accepted without murmur, turned her attention to the next pen. Here, raised above floor level in the corner of the pen was what could only be described as a crib. It was in green plastic and had an incubator dome folded back, but inside there were blue cot sheets and blankets tucked around, unmistakably, a small baby. A human baby. Its ears were slightly pointed and its nose was perhaps a little puckish — or that might have been imagination. It could not have been more than a few weeks old: it still had the closed-up tiny remoteness of the new-born, the far-away semi-smile in sleep that suggests a clinging memory of amniotic fluid, cocoons, safety, warmth and deep unconsciousness of light, air and space. In the other corner of the pen a squealing riot of piglets was tumbling over another large sow's belly like maggots over a dead dog.

Margery reached down and pressed a large green button on the outside wall of the pen. It set off a sound like a buzzsaw ripping through wood and its effect on the raucous jostling mob of piglets was instantaneous; they stopped suckling and fighting to suckle and dashed for a small opening at the back of the pen that seemed to lead through into a further quarter of some sort. As soon as they were all gone, Margery stooped down again, gingerly resting one hand on a slightly arthritic knee, and pressed the green button for a second time. A stainless steel shutter came down over the opening through which the piglet rabble had departed and their squeals were silenced. Margery proceeded to open the door of the pen and step inside. The large Large White sow watched her but did not move.

farmhouse, those hedges, this track, the very air and smells, all seemed to be matching with some imprint of memory he was carrying, had carried, inside him since before the age of reason. They were calling to him, calling him home. He felt a strange desire to fall to the ground and roll over and over; he visualised himself doing it for several moments before restoring his... his equilibrium. When he looked again, the two figures by the farmyard gate had disappeared.

As you get older you begin to resemble your own past. The imprinting is strong but latent; you overlay it with new experience and believe that you are forging new pathways. Then you discover that you have been selecting the experience so that it enables you to recreate yourself in the image of your own ancestry. It is like a voyage westwards through the wide world which takes you further and further from home but returns eventually from the east and tumbles over the point from which it started.

Margery knelt down and removed the baby from the dugs. She winded him gently and then lay him against her shoulder. He began to cry for a moment but had stopped by the time Margery had reached the door. Outside again, in the farmyard, she called to Joe, who was standing with a hosepipe sluicing mud off his boots before going into the house.

"Better check there's no loose papers in the office," said Margery. "I'll bring the baby things from the special unit and put the little one into the nursery."

Margery was a good mother. It was a shame it was illegal. There really was no harm in it, she was sure. Satisfied customers by the dozen provided testimonials which formed the backbone of her clandestine and sparingly distributed promotional literature.

Dear Mrs Muttock, I can honestly say that the treatment I received from your husband and you was the most considerate and humane it could possibly have been. I don't mind saying that my husband and I went through a pretty sticky patch when we found out I couldn't conceive my own but finding you really saved our bacon. — Mrs B., Rotherham, South Yorkshire.

Dear Mr and Mrs Muttock, Thank you once again for all you have done for my husband and me. From the sensitive way you took my husband's "contribution" to the sturdy little girl you passed over last month, your kindness and self-sacrifice have been worth every penny. Best wishes, Mr and Mrs T., Falkirk.

It didn't take long to ensure that there was nothing incriminating in view. Margery and Joe, despite the defensive systems on the track, were careful to keep the special operations tightly controlled. When potential clients called they were shown the farmhouse nursery, of course, but it had to look new each time; it wouldn't do to give the impression of a production line. The nursery was Graham's old bedroom at the front of the house,



overlooking the ornamental garden. It had been redecorated with wallpaper depicting the tale of the three little pigs. Joe had thought it was amusing. There was a mobile too, hanging above the bed, which consisted of a set of little pink plastic piglets hanging from nylon filaments. One had 'For Market' written on its back and was wearing a chef's hat, another was wearing slippers and a cardigan, a third was sitting upright with a knife and fork in its trotters, licking its lips at a joint of meat set before it on a small plastic tray. A fourth piglet was unencumbered and a fifth was apparently rubbing tears from its eyes, while a cleverly moulded extrusion attached to its foot carried a signpost pointing to "Home."

Margery returned to the kitchen from tidying up the special unit. She had the sleeping baby in her arms. Joe said the office was OK and they both looked around and then at each other, wondering whether they had forgotten anything. Margery went upstairs to lay the baby down in its own cot. As she came out of the room, she smoothed her apron, thinking to herself how unfair life was. But no time for that. She would have to think of an explanation for the baby that would satisfy Graham.

Downstairs again, Joe said, "I think we're clear on the ground. What are we going to say about the baby?"

"We tell him the truth."

"How much truth can he take?"

"I don't know. Let's see how he reacts. I think he knows anyway. I feel it."

"What about the Joneses?"

"They won't take long."

The Joneses were the latest in an increasingly long list of clients who had discovered the Muttcock Surrogacy Service and signed up for Margery to do their childbearing for them. She was after all a strapping country farmer's wife, with broad hips and a constitution like oak. For over four years, a succession of unfortunate or unscrupulous childless couples had found their way to the remote farmhouse to discover how parenthood could be purchased with few questions asked. Margery believed in the service she was offering. She thought of it as little more than an extension of wet-nursing and there were plenty of mythological and Biblical precedents, after all, after a fashion. She would have defended long and hard the rights of those mothers who were medically incapacitated from bearing their own offspring. She was less sympathetic to those whose inability appeared to stem from a reluctance to jeopardize or interrupt their careers or their social lives. They wanted a baby simply because their lifestyle seemed to lack something without one. It was a form of keeping up with the... the Joneses. Some of these had even returned to collect their babies with a nanny already in attendance. One memorable couple had left with the nanny in the back seat of their car, supervising the baby in a carrycot, while they bickered in the front about who was going to drive.

In such situations Margery was sorely tempted to reveal that she was not doing the actual uterine

development phase personally. But for the sake of the genuine hardship cases as much as because even simple human surrogacy was still seriously illegal, she kept the true nature of the service to herself. The Muttcock Variation of surrogacy was so far beyond illegal that it was probably still considered unthinkable, if not impossible. Having adapted well established AI techniques (artificial insemination, that is, not artificial intelligence), Margery and Joe had secretly branched out into second generation surrogacy with the help of a very carefully selected squad of pigs. Margery's own infertility had been the catalyst: but they had stumbled over the precise technique by a combination of chance, Joe's natural ingenuity and detailed study of the lifestyle of several parasites, including cuckoos. Having made the discovery and kept the secret, they had decided to capitalize upon it. Conventional farming was extremely hard work, after all.

As Joe was asking his question about the Joneses, they were turning off the lane, over the cattle grid and on to the track. They were very excited at the prospect of their baby's delivery. Mrs Jones, a woman of thirty-five with blocked Fallopian tubes, held a small handkerchief in her tightly clenched fist and struggled silently towards an outward air of calm control. She tried to moderate her breathing patterns and visualize something reassuring. Mr Jones was concentrating on avoiding potholes. When he was on a clear stretch he gave her hand a little squeeze. He saw a small white car stopped in the middle of the track some way ahead but thought nothing of it and pressed on. There was sufficient verge to get past.

As Graham walked towards the farmhouse, he was unaware of the car behind him. His attention was focused forwards and it required some effort of will to keep going. He remembered the bricks, the angle of the chimney pots, the missing spar from the garden gate, the detailed topography of the ruts and cobbles in the track as it approached the farmyard. Looking forwards, he saw himself as a... as a toddler, playing with buckets at the rainwater trough, picking clover, trying to climb the apple trees. Further forwards, even younger, he saw himself in the farmhouse kitchen, enveloped in the warm smell of compost and fresh washing. He was tottering from his highchair to the table leg to the hem of Margery's skirt as she stood at the sink peeling potatoes. He saw himself going to the slops bucket, attracted by its sicklysweet aroma, and start pulling out potato peelings and other mixed scrapings. He put some of them to his mouth and was considering their savoury appeal when Margery spotted him and swept him up into her arms, saying, "No, no, little boy. That's the pig's bucket, that is... You're in here with us now."

Then she put him down again quickly and turned back to the sink. Graham replayed the scene in his mind. That was it. That scene had been there in his memory all this time but he had never until now been conscious of it. Those had been her words:

"You're in here with us... now."

"... But words can never hurt me." That was it too. Things were falling into place. Graham remembered the complete saying. "Sticks and stones may break my bones..." It wasn't true, of course. Sayings so rarely were.

She had put him down and turned away just ever so slightly too quickly. Just ever so slightly like someone who has said something they ought not to have said and who wishes Time to speed up so that whatever it was can more quickly be forgotten. At the time Graham had been perhaps thirteen or fourteen months old.

Approaching the farmhouse, Graham realized he did not have the strength to confront his... to confront Margery and Joe directly. He decided suddenly to go round to the back gate of the farmyard and have a look in the pigsheds before he went in. Some chickens scattered as he cut through behind the shed where the old combine harvester rested but there was greater peace here on the flanks. Too predictable to stay on the track: that's what all the cars and people did. He pressed on behind the old haybarn, the redtiled roof of which was gaping pitifully as though bomb-damaged. The back door to the pigshed was rarely used. Graham had to lift it in its hinges to overcome the tussocky grass outside. He could hear muffled squealing from within and a sound that could have been the low hum of a motor or could have been the wind. It was dark inside and his eyes needed a few minutes to adjust. It seemed stuffy too, oppressive, airless, thick with warm smells he remembered too well. Graham took his jacket off and threw it on a trestle. The straw underfoot felt nice: he scuffed it with his feet. More squealing from the other side of an old wooden partition. Graham felt his heart begin to thump like a dog's tail on a drum. He loosened his shirt and kicked off his shoes.

Margery and Joe stiffened as the bell rang for attention. They knew Graham wouldn't ring. Where had he gone? Margery said, "I'll go" and went outside to the gate.

"Sorry about the notice," she said, greeting Mr and Mrs Jones like paying guests on a return visit, a relationship that was warm, hospitable and yet underneath still commercial. "You wouldn't believe the crime we get in the country."

Margery led the nervous couple round to the farmhouse door. Mrs Jones still had her handkerchief in her hand; she was glad to be moving at last. Later, Mr and Mrs Jones would have extreme difficulty recollecting the precise details of the baby's arrival. Their arrival, that is. Margery had ushered them straight upstairs to the nursery. She had gone first with Mrs Jones; Joe and Mr Jones had followed behind. As they came up the stairs, Mr Jones, just to make conversation, had asked, "What sort of farming do you do, Mr Muttock?" Joe noticed Margery ahead of him hesitate slightly in her tread. But he knew the best reply. "Pigs, mostly," he said.

In the nursery, the new parents looked into the

cot and saw at first nothing but a powder blue bump in the cotsheets. Mr Jones leaned over, brushing the piglet mobile with his head as he did so, setting off the built-in musical box. It played Rock-a-bye-baby as he peered in and announced,

"Look, I can see its head!"

"His head," corrected Mrs Jones, grasping her husband by the elbow, as if she and he were both about to tumble headlong into the cot. "Oh, isn't he adorable!"

Oblivious as they were to what was going on around them, Mr and Mrs Jones were easy meat to be steered back downstairs and into the yard. Margery had mumbled something about it being best for the new mother to take over as quickly as possible, that it was best for she and Joe to remain shadowy figures in their past. Joe had his arms folded across his chest and was looking friendly but saying nothing. It was close as he could come to being like a shadow.

Unfortunately, as they emerged into the yard, Graham also appeared from the direction of the pigshed. He had nothing on his feet and his shirt was open to the waist. His hair had strands of straw matted in it and he seemed to have streaks of something that could have been Marmite but probably wasn't across his cheeks. Despite all this he was smiling broadly. Under his right arm, he held a small pink piglet. Mrs Jones stopped, overcome with a mixture of fear and politeness. She held her powder-blue bundle closer to her but smiled in return. Mr Jones smiled too and said, "Er, hello."

Then Mr and Mrs Jones both looked at Margery, who for a moment was simply agape. Composing herself, she managed, "This is my ... my son, Graham." A pause. "He's a journalist."

There was another long pause, while all those present grappled with the incongruous symmetry of the scene. Margery began to have doubts about the significance of Graham's broad smile. Joe began to wonder what had been happening in the pigshed. Eventually, Mrs Jones, felt it incumbent on her to attempt a polite enquiry.

"Er ... and what is it you write about, Mr Muttock?"

It seemed to Margery that Graham gave an inordinately long look directly at the blue-wrapped infant before he responded. But he knew the right reply.

"Pigs, mostly," he said.

Ian Lee is one of *Interzone's* favourite oddballs. His earlier stories were "Driving Through Korea" (IZ 27), "Once Upon a Time in the Park" (IZ 30) and "A Lot of Mackerel, A Lot of Satellites" (IZ 37). There will be more. He continues to work in London as a civil servant, and has been thinking about writing a novel.

Adventures in Science

Colin Munro talks to Stephen Baxter

I came off the M25 at its northernmost point, leaving behind a concrete circus of speed and chaos to enter a world of lush green pastures and rustic villages. Buckinghamshire. As I drove through the rain past fields of sheep, I found it slightly ironic that the purpose of my journey to this part of Old England was to meet a man whose first novel deals with a universe far removed in time and space from this rural landscape. A hard universe of entropy and decay, where people sweat and toil to mine dead stars, eating and drinking recycled waste as resources decline. A weird universe of mutilated robots and flying trees, of dying technology and fantastical creatures.

The man? Stephen Baxter.

The novel? *Raft*.

Stephen is 33, slightly built and very softly spoken. An educated man with a mathematics degree from Cambridge University and a research degree in engineering, I asked him what had started him on the twisting trail leading from the halls of Academe to the writing of a science-fiction novel. He put me right immediately:

"I was interested in science fiction long before university, from my school days in fact. What started me was reading a collection of [Isaac] Asimov's short stories which also contained autobiographical notes of his early life and struggles. Something in there appealed to me and, with the encouragement of a teacher, I started to fill exercise books with my stories. I then tried to get some of them published, but this was in the Seventies when Britain was just a desert for science fiction — at least, it was as far as short stories were concerned. I even sent stuff off to the States, but that was just too big a hurdle to jump. For about ten years I struggled on with very little incentive. Sometimes my enthusiasm would wane, but over the years my writing became something of a compulsion with me and I'd keep going back to it. At last *Interzone* came along and I made my first sale, 'The



Xeelee Flower.' After that it became easier — there was a carrot at the end of the stick."

So did he view the years at university merely as some sort of detour from his ultimate destination?

"Not at all. University was the real world for me: being an author was an ambition I never thought I'd fulfil. Even today I find it difficult to accept that I'll ever be able to exist purely as a writer."

Did he find that his studies gave him more confidence in his writing?

"Definitely. After the mathematics degree I went on to get a research degree in engineering. Combining the two, I can now read some relatively heavy texts and come away with some interesting ideas. I also think that, if you are going to write what is known as 'hard' science fiction, you

run the danger of setting yourself up to be shot down, so you have to be reasonably happy with the mechanics of your plot. For example, I once sent a short story called 'Khorta's Experiment' to *Interzone*. I quite liked the tale and was therefore a bit surprised when it was rejected until I read the reason why it was rejected. The story was set in an alternate universe based on the premise that the larger an object was, the faster it fell. Unfortunately the magazine pointed out to me that if one followed the laws of this universe to their logical conclusions, planetary systems would be incapable of retaining their atmosphere, effectively killing off all my characters! Now that is an example of fairly constructive criticism, but in the American market in particular they can be rather niggling in

their comments, producing sets of equations to prove that this couldn't happen or that it should happen but doesn't. So, as I've said, you've got to be careful that your science is, if nothing else, plausible science."

What then, I inquired, was the fate of "Khorta's Experiment"?

"Lying in a box somewhere, waiting for me to get the slide rule out," he said.

Stephen's stories have proven to be not only plausible but popular, culminating in 1988 with his being a prizewinner in the Writers of the Future competition with a tale entitled "Blue Shift." Here he describes the massive gravitational disruption caused by an alien artefact floating in the deep dark of space and one lone human's attempt to investigate it. I asked him, of his own works, did he have any particular favourites?

"It's difficult to say," he responds. "Since 'The Xeelee Flower' was published, I must have written about forty short stories. If I had to pick a top three, I suppose, in no particular order, they would be 'Blue Shift,' 'Traces' and my latest, 'Planck Zero'."

What made this trio special?

"The motivation and characterization are better realized in these than in some of my other stories. Coupled with some good science, they work for me."

It is easy to realize why Stephen may have a problem singling out any one work of his for praise: of the forty short stories referred to, most of them have been accepted for publication. Not a bad track record for a relatively "unknown" author. Now, however, he has evolved into one of that strange race of creatures known as Novelists. How successful has his evolution been?

On the dust jacket of *Raft* Charles Sheffield states that Stephen Baxter is the man who has put the "S" back into "SF." Whilst not necessarily disagreeing with this view, I put it to Stephen that Mr Sheffield may be doing him a slight disservice by drawing attention away from the fact that Stephen's fiction is at least as strong as his science. As a boy, one of the major attractions of science fiction to me was the sheer escapism of the genre, its ability to conjure up magical worlds populated by strange characters and exotic aliens. Over the years, perhaps in an attempt to gain mainstream respectability, sf has in the hands of many authors become rather dry and lacklustre in its delivery, leaving the magical element to the new breed of fantasy writers. *Raft* reverses this trend, successfully giving the reader a damned good adven-

ture. Was this a conscious effort on the author's part or simply indicative of his own style of writing? I pause for breath whilst Stephen considers the question.

"Well," he begins, "I do tend to agree with you that a lot of the fun has gone from science fiction. At the same time, all I was consciously trying to do was to write good fiction. I try never to forget that it's the story that keeps the reader turning the pages."

In *Raft* Stephen hypothesizes a universe which exists on the far borders of a black hole, where stars are born and die within a year or two of their creation and where gravity a billion times stronger than here on Earth can create some very unusual circumstances. Which came first, the universe or the plot?

"The universe. The way I work, I might read something, say in a scientific journal, which makes me think What if... I then take that idea and extrapolate until I arrive at what seems to be a possible setting for a story, but it's then the role of the plot and the characters to bring that potential world to life. Having said that, there is absolutely no point in creating a different universe only to add a story line that could just as easily be set right here on Earth."

So, in his view, what makes a good story? Stephen has no doubts:

"Conflict — the interplay between the characters, how they relate to one another and how they react to various situations. In *Raft* the players are the descendants of the crew of a spaceship which had entered this particular universe by accident, becoming stranded in the process. Generations later their offspring have formed a stratified, class-ridden society. Conflict and danger arises from the clash between classes, between old and new ideas, and between individuals. The world of *Raft* is coming to an end and things must change — but will they? In the book I deal with some fairly archetypal story elements but I hope that I deal with them in a fresh way."

Anyone reading *Raft* cannot fail to notice the Biblical references echoing from the pages — Rees, the central character, is at times a strange hybrid of Moses, Jonah and Noah, there's a futuristic ark and a new exodus. In "Traces," mentioned earlier, the plot hinges around one man's religious beliefs and their refutation by modern science. Is there any overt religious message in these stories? Stephen ponders the suggestion.

"I certainly had a religious upbringing. Anyone who has had a

Catholic education will know what I mean when I talk about the intense way that religion is drummed into you. These days I'm just not sure about anything any more so it's possible that occasionally these doubts surface in my writing. In *Raft* it's on a much more subconscious level than in 'Traces,' where the religious element was integral to the plot. Equally, whilst you could say that spiritual matters are a personal concern of mine, I feel that not only is it quite legitimate for science fiction to deal with the subject but that it is almost inevitable that science and faith are confrontational."

So why does Stephen Baxter choose to work within the framework of sf?

"I think the answer to that is fairly simple. Science fiction is the art of exploring the possible. I find it exciting to think that in sf in general and 'hard' sf in particular you are writing about things and conditions which might just possibly exist, as opposed to, say, fantasy, which definitely does require a suspension of disbelief. Sometime, someplace, these things could or have happened. That's what makes it fascinating."

As a Writer of the Future, who has influenced him in the past?

"Ray Bradbury was one of the first 'adult' authors I discovered, mainly because his books *R Is For Rocket* and *S Is For Space* somehow found their way into the kiddies' section of my local library. I think I was about eleven when I read him. After that I pinched my parents' tickets to get into the adult section where I could read the likes of Bradbury and James Blish to my heart's content, especially Blish — he is a big favourite of mine. As an aside, I think that his novella 'Surface Tension' is comparable in some respects to *Raft*. Anyway, later I came across the books of Larry Niven: I really admire his work, the science is always very clear and well laid out, very visual with good storylines."

How does the kid from the local library cope with making the transition to author? Was it my imagination or did Mr Baxter blush?

"I must admit that I find it a little embarrassing sometimes, especially at things like signings where my stories have appeared in anthologies. You can imagine what it's like — a normal Saturday afternoon with me just sitting in a bookshop somewhere with people coming with their books for me to sign. As I said, somewhat embarrassing, but at the same time quite flattering."

Does he get much feedback from his public?

"Not so much at signings, but conventions can be productive — people mix a bit more, particularly at the bar. I've met a few writers there, made a few friends. In fact writers seem to huddle together quite a lot at these things — I don't know if that's an act of self-defence or not! Seriously, I do quite like conventions: I think sf fans are a special breed, very loyal and very knowledgeable, and it's always good to get their views on what you've been writing."

And what has he been writing, what is next after *Raft*? "There's a few projects on the go. Probably the next novel to be published will be *Phaeton*, an adaptation of another short story of mine, set in an alternate Victorian Britain, where the Victorians discover an accessible form of antimatter which they refer to as 'anti-ice.' This discovery halts the decline of the Empire and obviously alters history in rather a dramatic way."

Quite a departure from *Raft*. Was it more difficult to write?

"Not so much more difficult as requiring a lot more research. In any book dealing with the future you can make it up as you go along, creating your own authenticity, whereas in a book dealing with the past the authenticity is already there. I want to make sure that I get away from the Hollywood perception of Victorian England which seems to revolve around gaslight and pea-soupers. I needed to know what sort of ties they wore, what sort of shoes they wore, what slang was in vogue at the time. It took a fair amount of reading to find these things out."

Other writers, meeting with varying degrees of success, have attempted Victorian science fiction, one of the latest additions to "steam punk" being Gibson's and Sterling's *The Difference Engine*. Critics of that book have argued that it contained some fairly arbitrary meddling with history, unrelated to the main thrust of the plot, which proposes the successful development by Charles Babbage of a fully working computer by the middle of the 1800s. Will Stephen allow himself some authorial ad libs with his story or will he stay true to a logical progression of events subsequent to the discovery of a radical new energy source in the 19th century?

"I'd like to think that what comes out in *Phaeton* will be a logical extrapolation of events. As I haven't read *The Difference Engine* I certainly can't comment on its story line. I can therefore only speak for my own work and say that there is more than

enough room for artistic restructuring which still follows faithfully on from the initial premise of *Phaeton*."

What is the flavour of the new book?

"Well, one critic of the short story upon which *Phaeton* is based described it as a 'dark Jules Verne.' If I can retain that feel within the novel I'll be perfectly happy. What I've written is an adventure yarn which embraces the social, political and military implications of Britain becoming and remaining the world's first superpower. It really does raise so many interesting questions. Take America today, for example: what do you do in Iraq? Become involved in some foreign war or stand aside and let thousands of innocents die? The moral dilemmas are endless. You then take the power that America currently holds, multiply it a few times and place it in the hands of an imperial Britain unrestrained by the counterbalances of other countries or organizations. What happens to a nation that wields so much power? What happens to the individuals that form that nation? That's the dark side. On a lighter note there is the fun to be had in creating Victorian heavier-than-air flying machines and gaslit rockets to the moon!" Stephen looks positively gleeful as he contemplates this prospect.

What makes a writer of "hard" science fiction choose the past as his next canvas?

"I'm conscious that I don't want to be seen churning out the same stuff to my readers," replies Stephen. "If I have any philosophy central to my work, it is to make it interesting, to avoid predictability."

OK, after Victorian England, what's the next port of call?

"There's the Xeelee trilogy. I'm currently working on pulling that together."

I ask Stephen to tell me more.

"Well, basically these books will expand upon my Xeelee stories, incorporating the novella 'The Baryonic Lords,' which forms the climax to the whole saga. The idea sprang from that first story to appear in *Interzone*, 'The Xeelee Flower,' the Xeelee being the dominant race of the universe. Compared to race of beings, mankind and all his works amount to nothing — they are as far above us as we are above termites. Despite their apparent disdain for humanity the Xeelee are in fact protecting us and other civilizations in a sort of ultimate light-versus-dark struggle. The trilogy literally spans millennia in its telling. All good stuff."

Bearing in mind an earlier point, would it be fair to suggest that for

"light vs dark" one could read "good vs evil", and for "an incredibly advanced, dominating alien race" one could say "gods"? I put this to Stephen. "I suppose it could be viewed in that context," he admits.

The Xeelee tales are obviously very close to Stephen Baxter's heart. Of his published work, over two thirds of it deals to some extent with the Xeelee civilization. What attraction does the Xeelee mythos hold for him?

"I don't really know. Perhaps there is something in the religious undercurrent which appeals to me. Certainly as a writer I am happy to have such a vast time scale to work with. It allows me much more scope in the ideas for my stories: where they happen, when they happen, whether I have the Xeelee in sharp relief or in soft focus. At the same time this can cause problems — trying to encapsulate everything, even into three novels, takes a lot of work."

My next question to Stephen is one which I'm sure many readers of *Raft* would want me to ask: when can we expect to see *Raft II*?

"*Raft II* is a distinct possibility, but as yet I can't say when it may appear. It depends on a number of factors, not least of which is the publisher's desire to see how well the original goes down both here and in America."

Does he feel that there is a market for his work in the States?

"It's hard to say. I'd like to think that it will be reasonably well received. There is a demand there for hard sf novels, but I really don't want to second guess. So far their reaction has been quite encouraging."

On that cautiously optimistic note we more or less concluded our discussion. I made my farewells and headed back to my car.

Sitting in a three mile tailback on the M25 I had time to reflect on my views of Stephen Baxter. Quiet, serious, a dedicated writer, certainly he was all of these things. But one trait which I may not have been able to convey through the vehicle of the above interview, and for that failing I apologize, was the sheer enthusiasm and love that he so evidently possesses for the genre he has chosen to make his own. I look down at the clipboard lying open on the passenger seat next to me and note that there is one question which I had forgotten to ask him. Question number five: "What does it take, in your opinion, to be a good writer?" It doesn't matter — I think he's answered it anyway.

The Baryonic Lords

(Part Two)

Stephen Baxter

Synopsis of Part One

After a million years humans have returned to the universe.

Through a hypercube they called the *Eight Rooms* a band of humans, led by the woman Erwal, have escaped from the box-world within which humanity has been confined for most of its history.

Man had been imprisoned there for his own protection: to put an end to his futile wars with the Xeelee.

The universe has changed beyond recognition. The Xeelee, pursuing their own vast Project, have rebuilt much of it: they have constructed a giant artifact, the Ring, to open a doorway in space itself, and they have launched engines back into time to modify their own history...

But the universe has changed in other ways, beyond the capacity of even the Xeelee.

The stars have grown old. Too old, too quickly...

Erwal and her followers did not emerge unnoticed. The Qax, an ancient enemy of humankind, noted their arrival with interest. And Erwal has a Friend, an advanced-form human called Paul, a toy-creature constructed by a being known as the antiXeelee. Paul has helped Erwal to operate a ship left for the humans by the Xeelee.

While Erwal learns how to fly the ship, Paul crosses the universe, seeking a safe haven for the humans. He encounters a Barrier thrown across space - a Barrier breached by dark matter. Now Paul believes he has come to understand, at last, the true history of the universe, and the goals of the Xeelee themselves...

Paul brooded over the grisly history of the universe.

Dark matter comprised most of the mass of the universe. Baryons — protons and neutrons, the components of light, visible matter — and cosmions — their dark matter analogues — existed largely independently of each other, interacting only through gravitational attraction.

All matter, dark and light, had erupted from the singularity at the start of time which had forced space itself to unfurl like a torn sheet. The dark matter had spread like some viscous liquid into every corner of the young universe and, seething, settled into a kind of equilibrium. The baryons had been sprinkled like a froth over this sea. At first the

dark ocean was featureless, save only for variations in its smooth density. These glitches, representing mass concentrations on the order of millions of solar masses, formed gravitational wells, cosmic potholes into which fragments of light matter fell, pooled, and began to coalesce. Gravitational warming began, and — finally, fitfully — the first stars sputtered to brightness. A billion years after the singularity the galaxies formed, trapped like flies in the dark matter wrinkles. Slowly dark currents pushed the galaxies together, and large-scale structures — the vast, gaudy superstructure that would span the universe — began to evolve.

Most of this made not a damn bit of difference to the dark matter sea... But, here and there, the material of the shining stars began to exert an influence on its dark counterpart. Just as baryons had slithered into dark matter potholes, so — on a much smaller scale — cosmions collected in the pinpoint gravity wells of the new stars. Even the human star, Sol, had contained a dark core the size of a moon: baryonic scientists had observed these dark parasites, both indirectly by their effect on, for example, the neutrino output of stars, and directly, in rare instances in which the outer layers of the mother star were removed, perhaps by the proximity of a nova.

Thanks to the baryonic stars small-scale structure entered the dark matter universe. Paul speculated that a chemistry must have begun, with varieties of the cosmions combining to form some counterpart of molecules; strange rains had sleeted over the surfaces of the shadow worlds, still buried in the blazing cores of baryon stars.

At last life had arisen.

Paul had no way of knowing if the transition to animacy had occurred on one of the shadow planets or on several, perhaps in a variety of forms. Nor could he guess what form that life had taken, what technologies and philosophies it had evolved.

But he could speculate that it had spread, sailing out through the baryon stars as if they did not exist, colonizing shadow world after shadow world. Perhaps, Paul supposed, vast ships had plied between the hearts of stars, with the humans and other baryonic races all unaware.

Aeons had passed with the two grand families of life, dark and light, oblivious of each other...

Then something had happened.

Again Paul could only guess. Probably a supernova had ripped apart a baryon star, laying waste to its host shadow world in the process. Paul imagined the horror of the cosmion civilization as the irrelevant froth of baryons through which they moved turned into a source of deadly danger, perhaps threatening the ultimate survival of their civilization.

Many courses of action must have been considered, including — Paul speculated with a kind of shudder — the total annihilation of the baryonic content of the universe.

But without baryon stars and their tiny gravity wells new shadow worlds could not form; therefore without the baryons there could be no replacement for the cosmion worlds as they grew stale and died: and so, in the end, the dark civilization itself would falter and fail.

So the baryons had to stay. The cosmionic peoples needed the stars.

But they didn't need the damn things exploding all over the place. And the universe was full of these vast, gaudy stars, burning off energy and forever quivering on the brink of catastrophic explosions. Such extrovert monsters were simply unnecessary; all the dark races required from a star was a reasonably stable gravity well. The remnants of large stars — white dwarfs and neutron stars — were quite satisfactory, and so were immature stars: the brown dwarfs and Jovian gas planets which were warm but not quite large enough for fusion to be initiated.

Cold, dull, and immensely stable. That was how a star should be.

So the rulers of the dark worlds became Engineers, and they set out to transform the universe.

The Engineers set up two great programmes. The first had been to shape the evolution of new stars. Paul imagined invisible ships cruising through the vast gas clouds which served as the breeding grounds for new stars; the Engineers had used huge masses to skim layers off protostars and so condemn them to become brown dwarfs, little grander than Jupiter.

The second programme had been to rationalize existing stars.

If the things were going to explode or swell up like balloons, the Engineers had reasoned, then they would prefer to accelerate the process and get it out of the way. Then the cosmion civilization could grow without limit or threat, basking in the long, stately twilight of the universe.

So the Engineers had settled into the hearts of stars and, by building huge dark matter structures, distorted the stars' physical processes and so accelerated their evolution and ultimate extinction.

With cool calculation they made the stars old.

Soon the first supernovae began. They spread like a plague from the Engineers' centre of operation.

And the Xeelee became troubled.

By this time, Paul speculated, the Xeelee were already lords of the baryonic universe. They had

initiated many of their vast cosmic engineering projects, and a host of lesser races had begun to dog their gigantic footsteps.

The Xeelee focused attention on the Engineers' activities, and rapidly came to understand the nature of the threat they faced. In peril was not just the future of the Xeelee themselves, but of all baryonic life.

Perhaps they had tried to communicate, Paul speculated; perhaps they even succeeded. But the conflict with the Engineers was so fundamental that communication was meaningless. This was a dispute not between individuals, worlds, even species; it was a struggle for survival between two inimical life modes trapped in a single universe.

It was a struggle the Xeelee could not afford to lose. They abandoned their projects and mobilized.

The final war must have started slowly. Paul imagined Xeelee nightships descending on stars known to harbour key Engineer installations, cherry-red starbreaker beams shining like swords. And there would be reciprocal action by the Engineers; their unimaginable weapons would slide all but unobserved past the best defences of the Xeelee.

And the Xeelee must, about the same time, have initiated the construction of the great causal loop controlled by the antiXeelee with its seed pods. At last Paul understood the antiXeelee's purpose: the Xeelee had, with awesome determination, decided to modify their own evolutionary history in order to equip themselves for the battle with the Engineers. Paul pictured a branching of the universe as the antiXeelee changed the past. The Xeelee, modified and prewarned, had time in this new history to prepare for the coming conflict, including the construction of the mighty artefact called Bolder's Ring — an escape route in case, despite all their preparation, the war were lost.

And all the time humans and other races, oblivious to the great purpose of the Xeelee, had scrambled for abandoned Xeelee toys. Eventually humans had even had the audacity to attack the Xeelee themselves, unaware that the Xeelee were waging a total war against a common enemy far more deadly than the Qax, or the Squeem, or any of man's ancient foes.

And still the cancer of ageing, swelling and exploding stars had spread. The growth of the Engineered regions must have been little short of exponential.

At last the Xeelee realized that — despite the deployment of the resources of a universe, despite the manipulation of their own history — this was a war they could not win; and, worse, they might be overrun before the Ring could be completed. So, in a last, desperate gamble, they had constructed the Barrier: a wall of supernovae thrown up between the Ring, their last hope, and the progression of the Engineers. The Barrier was not, Paul saw now, a defence in the military sense; it was more like a firebreak. But it could not contain the Engineers. Paul had already seen how the wall of stars had been comprehensively breached, perhaps even

before the final supernovae flickered into darkness.

But the Barrier served its purpose. The Xeelee had won time: time to close the antiXeelee's causal loop, to complete the Ring and flee the universe they had lost.

Paul considered what he had learned. Since the retreat of the Xeelee the universe had been lost to baryonic life forms. The Engineers had not yet completed their vast conversion programmes — stars were still shining —but at last, in a time not very distant, the final light would be extinguished and the baryonic universe would grow uniform and cold, a stable home for the Engineers.

So, as he had suspected, Paul's little group of humans must follow the Xeelee through the Ring. There should, he realized, be little problem in traversing the universe in the Xeelee ship; the Engineers would surely not trouble to impede a single craft. Perhaps this escape had been the intention of the Xeelee all along, Paul mused. Perhaps they had provided many other junior baryonic races with similar 'lifeboats' so they could follow the Xeelee to a place where baryonic life was still possible.

He wondered what lay beyond the flaw in space at the heart of Bolder's Ring: the quantum functions he followed terminated at that point, and so he had no way of knowing. Perhaps the human ship would follow the Xeelee to their new universe; perhaps other groups of humans would be encountered, adapted to suit strange new conditions; perhaps the little band of primitives would find themselves alone.

Paul had learned enough. Turning back at the Barrier he began to make his way back to Sol...

But again there was something in the way.

Paul stopped. He assembled sub-awarenesses to consider the new barrier, confused. This time it was no simple wall of matter; the wave function guides he was following had been distorted, even terminated, and —

He was being watched.

Paul froze, shocked; his sub-personalities condensed into something almost as coherent and limited as his old corporeal self.

There was something here: something aware and able to study him... and to stop him.

As if trembling, he tried to respond. The data that formed his being was stored in a lattice of quantum wave functions; now he distorted that lattice deliberately to indicate an omission. A lack. A question.

— *Who are you?* —

The answer was imposed directly on his awareness; it was like being exposed to a raw, vicious dream, to a million years of venom.

— *Qax.* —

The gateway between the Eighth Room and the ship healed shut, leaving Erwal and Sura alone in the ship.

"Where shall we go?" Sura asked innocently.



Erwal smiled. "Well, that's a good question." And, she realized, she barely knew how to start framing an answer. She flexed the gloves, and the panels, which had been displaying scenes of stars and of the Eighth Room, now filled with representations which were obviously artificial. Sura stared at the graphic circles, cones and ellipses, with confusion. "What does all this mean?"

Erwal withdrew her hands from the mittens. "I can only guess. But I think these pictures are meant to show us what this world is like." She reached up to grasp Sura's hand. "Sura, you know that the world we came from was like a box. There was the Shell below our feet, and Home above us, closing us in."

Sura sniffed. "Any child could see that."

"Yes. But now we've come out of that box; and out here it's different. There is no box any more! The Eighth Room, the doorway to the box, is just — hanging there."

"The way the first Room was hanging over the

ground, when we found it?"

"Yes, but — even more so," said Erwal, struggling to make sense. "It simply hangs! And there is no ground above it, or below it, as far as I can see. Just empty space, and a great pit of stars."

Sura, her mouth open, thought it over. "I feel scared."

So do I, Erwal thought grimly; and she reflected on the many times she had instinctively sought a colourful roof-world over her head, and how she had cowered in her seat, wishing she were at home in her teepee with a hard roof of rock between her and the stars.

But she said: "Yes, it's scary. But we're safe, here in the ship."

Sura studied images of the Eighth Room. "If we've just come out of a great box — through the Eighth Room — then why can't we see the outside of the box from here? All you can see is the Room itself!" Sura sounded aggrieved, as if this were an affront to her intelligence.

Erwal sighed and pushed a lick of hair from her brow. "Love, that's just one of a hundred — a thousand things about this situation I don't understand at all. I think we have to proceed with what we can understand."

Sura pouted. "And what's that?" she asked irritably. "Because none of this makes any sense so far."

Erwal pointed to a particular schematic. This showed a bright light, little more than a dot, surrounded by nine concentric circles. A small, framework cube sat on the third circle from the centre, slowly following the track in an anticlockwise direction; a complex arrangement of light points similarly followed the fifth circle. The other circles were empty. "Look at that," said Erwal. "What does that remind you of?"

Sura reached out and, with one finger, touched the framework cube. The screen blanked and filled up with a magnified image of the cube; Sura snatched back her finger, startled.

Erwal laughed. "Don't be afraid. The panels won't hurt you."

"The box is the Eighth Room."

"That's right!" Erwal touched a blank part of the image and the circles returned. "I think this shows where the Room is, you see. It's following this circular path around the bright light. And here's — something else — following the fifth circle."

"What's the bright light?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's a sun, like the sun we had in our box-world."

Sura touched the bright point; it expanded to show a dim globe, yellowing and pocked by huge dark spots. "Well, if it's a sun it doesn't look very promising," Sura said.

Erwal laughed. "Perhaps it's getting old, just as ours did."

"Do you think we should go there?"

Erwal shrugged. "I'm not sure if there's much point."

Sura restored the image of circles and counted. "Nine circles. We're on the third, and this

other lot is on the fifth. But the other circles are empty. I wonder why."

"I don't know," Erwal said. "Maybe there were things there originally, which were destroyed. Or taken away."

"What could they have been?"

"How should I know? For goodness' sake, Sura..."

"I'm sorry." Sura wrinkled her nose, and studied the picture. "Well, then; there seems to be only one place to go."

"The fifth circle?"

"Yes. But how do we get there?"

Erwal smiled at her, slid her hands into the mittens once more, and flexed her fingers. A feeling of power, of release, swept over her. "That's the easy part," she said slowly. "I just close my eyes —"

The ship had waited a million years for this.

It spread its sycamore-seed wings wide and soared through the wreckage of the Solar System, barely restrained by the tentative will of the woman at the controls.

Erwal and Sura felt waves of motion-echoes. It was, thought Erwal, like being a child again and riding the shoulders of a lively mummy-cow.

Sura laughed and clung to Erwal's neck.

Within minutes the voyage was over; the ship, cooling, folded its wings.

The women stared up at the view panels.

At the heart of the fifth-circle complex was a single, immensely large, flattened sphere of gas. Much of the gas glowed a dull red, the colour of burnt wood, although here and there fires still raged within the atmosphere, blurred patches of yellow or white. Three smaller globes, equally spaced, circled the centre sphere; their panel images bristled with detail. Further out there was a ring of debris, broad and softly sparkling; Erwal wondered if there had once been still more of these globes, now long since destroyed.

She bade the ship slide around the limb of the fireball. She watched the burning landscape unfold beneath her, and shivered with a sudden sense of scale. "Sura, that thing is immense."

"What is it? Is it a sun?"

"Perhaps. But it is far bigger than our sun ever was. And it seems to be nearly burnt out now."

"Perhaps it lit up the smaller globes," Sura said brightly. "Perhaps people lived on the other globes, and set fire to this one to give them warmth. Erwal, is that possible?"

"Anything's possible," Erwal murmured.

The ship had dipped so close that it had flattened into a landscape of glowing gas. Erwal felt a sudden thrill of apprehension. Without hesitating she pulled the ship up and away from the sun-world.

"Let's go see the other globes," she said to Sura.

Beneath Jupiter's ruined atmosphere, ancient defence systems stirred. Erwal brought the ship to the nearest of the

globes. Soon the little world filled a panel; from pole to pole it was encrusted with detail, so that its surface reminded Erwal of fine leatherwork — or, perhaps, of a cow-tree overrun with lichen and moss. She spread her wings and swooped close over the surface: a miniature landscape rushed with exhilarating speed beneath her bow.

Sura clapped her hands, childlike.

Erwal studied the panel. Now she saw that the surface was coated with buildings: they were all about the scale of the Eighth Room, but they came in every shape Erwal could imagine — domes, cubes, pyramids, cylinders and spires — and there were bowls and cup-shaped amphitheatres lying open to the sky. Arcs and loops of cable, fixed to the buildings, lay draped over the landscape, knitting it all together like some immense tapestry.

Nowhere did Erwal see an open space, a single blade of grass. And nowhere did she see any sign of people.

With immense care she bade the ship settle to the top of one of the broader buildings. Sura wanted to climb out and explore — perhaps see what was inside the mysterious buildings — but the ship's door would not open, and Sura stamped her foot.

"I think the ship knows what's best for us," Erwal said. "Maybe we shouldn't go outside. It might be too hot — or too cold — or perhaps it's dangerous for us in some other way we can't imagine."

"But it's so frustrating!"

Erwal frowned. "Well, perhaps there's something I can do about that." She slid her hands into her mittens. "Here's something I found a few days ago. Come and see."

The panel over the control table showed the blank exterior of a bubble-shaped building; a circular door led to an intriguing — but darkened — interior. Now Erwal moved her thumbs, raised her wrists — and the field of view of the window panel moved forward. It was as if the darkened doorway was approaching.

She felt Sura clutch the back of her chair. The girl said, "Erwal, are we moving?"

"No," Erwal said slowly. "But the picture is. Do you understand?" She waited nervously for the girl's reaction. Oddly, of all the miracles Erwal had encountered, she had found this one of the most difficult to absorb. So she was in a craft that travelled through emptiness: well, birds flew through the air, did they not? ... And it was well known that humans had once built such craft as routinely as Damen now built a fire. Even the Friend's visions were reminiscent of dreams she had endured before, particularly since the final disappearance of Teal. So these phenomena were just extensions of the familiar.

But a window was just a hole in a teepee, with a flap to gum down when the wind rose.

Obviously every time you looked through a window you would see the same scene. The idea that a window, without moving, could show different scenes — so that it was as if she were

looking through the eyes of another — was beyond comprehension.

Sura stared at the unfolding image, eyes wide with wonder. She said: "Can you make it go any faster?"

Erwal sighed. Maybe she should give up trying to work these things out, and accept the windows for what they were.

Useful magic.

For the next hour and more they roamed vicariously through the abandoned streets of the city-world. This had obviously once been a world of people — they recognized chairs, bedrooms, tables, all clearly human-sized. But there was no sign of humanity: no pictures on the walls, no decoration anywhere, no curtains or rugs beyond the severely functional. And building after building was filled with huge devices, quite unrecognizable to the two women: vast cylinders lying on their side or pointing through apertures at the sky, and rooms full of grey, coldly anonymous boxes.

Everywhere was darkness and — Erwal felt — coldness. The building-world had been left neat, perfect — not a chair overturned — and quite empty.

Sura, squatting on the floor, wrapped her arms about herself and shivered. "I don't think I would have liked to have lived here."

"Nor I." Erwal wondered about the purpose of all these banks of machines and boxes. The devices lacked the simple, human utility of the lockers she had found on the ship; these machines were brooding, almost threatening. Perhaps this was a world of weapons, of war.

Maybe, she thought, it was just as well they had found this place empty.

"Erwal." Sura stood gracefully and pointed at the image in the panel; an array of grey boxes was sliding away from them. "What's happening? Are you moving the image again?"

Erwal held her hands up before her face. "You can see I'm not. Sura, I don't understand what is happening." She thrust her hands into the gloves and changed the images in the panels; she looked below, above, to either side of the ship, half-expecting to espy a group of giant machine-men hauling at the ship...

Then she found something.

A tubular curtain, transparent but stained with blue, had fallen all around the ship. Its walls sparkled. The tube reached miles above the surface of the little world, and, looking up it, Erwal could see that it stretched all the way to the ruined sun-world.

The ship was rising up this tunnel.

Soon the machine-world shrank to a fist-sized ball beneath them.

"Erwal! Do something! Take us away from here! If we crash into the sun, we'll be destroyed!"

But Erwal could only clench her mittened fists. "I can't," she said softly, staring at the panel. "I can't do anything. It won't respond."

The walls of the tunnel rushed by, a blur now.

A box had closed around Paul. Of course it was not possible for Paul to be subjected to a simple physical confinement; nevertheless the wave-function world lines which constituted his being — and his link to Sol — were bent to the point of breaking by the immaterial walls around him.

He couldn't move.

Shock and surprise surged through him. Of all the strange things he had seen in his travels this was the first to endanger him directly. With a startling shift of perspective he realized that he had come to think of himself as a god, an observer, invulnerable, above interference. Now he felt an overpowering urge to retreat into the cave of a simple quasi-human self-model... but if he went that way, madness and terror would surely follow.

Striving for order he set up limited sub-personalities to study his prison. Data began to reach him, and slowly he came to understand.

He was trapped in the focal zone of a radiation of an enormously high frequency. The zone was a sphere only a few feet across; nonlinear effects causing energy to cascade into lower frequencies must have made the zone glow like a jewel. Individual photons darted through the focus like birds, their wavelength a hundred billion billion times smaller than the radius of an electron; the short wavelength implied immense energy, so that each photon was a potent little bullet of energy/mass... in fact, so massive that each photon was almost a quantum black hole. And it was this that was confining him. Black holes cut the world lines of which he was composed; it was as if a corporeal human were confined by a web of a billion burning threads.

So it was an effective cage. The Qax had taken him.

That left one question: why?

Calm now, he rearranged the data strung along his wave-function components so that the omissions represented by the question were clear and sharp.

He waited. He did not trouble to measure the time.

...The Qax returned. Paul rapidly assembled a set of multiple attention foci. There was a more coherent feel to the sleet of singularity radiation now; in a systematic fashion the frequencies, phases and paths of the powerful quanta were being modified by their passage through his being. He was being interrogated, he realized: each photon was taking a few more bits of data from him, no doubt for study by his captor. It was a data dump; he was being read as if he were some crude storage device.

He felt no resentment; nor did he try to hide. What was the point? His captor had to be aware already of the little band of humans skimming their crude ship around Sol's gravity well. His best hope was to let the Qax learn, wait for some kind of feedback.

But he kept his question representations in place.

Slowly he discerned a further evolution in the hail of photons. He spread his awareness as wide as he dared, and, like a man straining to hear distant fragments of conversation, he listened. He caught glimpses of the Qax itself, elusive impressions of something fast, quick-thinking, physically compact; the radiation cage imprisoning him implied a command of the deepest structure of the physical universe.

...And he heard hatred.

The brutal fact of it was shocking, overpowering. The Qax hated him; it hated him because he was human, and that loathing warped the path of every photon that tore through him. The hatred dominated his captor's existence and was harnessed to a determination to expunge every trace of humanity from the universe.

Paul felt awe at the crime that had caused such enmity across a desert of time.

The unequal flow of data continued for an immeasurable period. Then —

A change. The boundary conditions of his photon cage were being altered, so that the region of spacetime which restrained him was translated...

He was being moved.

Now there was another component to the complex rain of photons. Paul strained. There was another individual out there; something huge, vast, stately, with thought processes on timescales of hours, so that its slow speculations rang like gongs... And yet it too was a Qax; there was such a similarity to the structure of Paul's captor that the giant surely belonged to, or at least originated from, the same species. And still the drizzle of inferred data was not resolved; there were unattributed overtones, like higher harmonics on a violin string.

There were more of them out there, he realized, too many for him to discriminate as individuals, a vast hierarchy of Qax looming over him, inspecting him like immense biologists over some splayed insect. They existed on every imaginable scale of space and time, and yet they remained a single species — scattered, multiply evolved, but still essentially united.

And they all hated him.

The photon cage disappeared.

Freed, Paul felt like a spider whose web has been cut. Rapidly he assessed the few quantum strands which still linked him to Sol, the Barrier, the Ring. Spider-like, he set to work to build on those threads.

With a small part of him he looked around.

He was back in the original galaxy of mankind — and, of course, of the Qax. He saw a brown dwarf, a Jovian world ten times the size of Jupiter; it circled a shrunken white star. His focus of awareness orbited a few hundred miles above the planet's cloud tops. Studying the clouds he saw turbulent cells on all scales, feeding off each other in a great fractal cascade of whirling energy. A massive brown-red spot, a self-organizing island of stability, sailed through the roiling storms.

He mused over the spectacle, puzzled as to why

he had been brought here. The energy for all that weather must come from the planet's interior and its rotation, rather than the wizened star. This monster world was self-contained and complete in itself: it didn't need the rest of the universe. In fact, Paul reflected wryly, this world should be safe even from the depredations of the Engineers. While the dark matter foe turned stars to dust this world and billions like it would spin on, a container of massive but purposeless motion, until the energy dissipated by its huge weather systems caused its core to cool, its rotation to grind slowly down. Then at last it would come to rest, its only function being to serve as a gravitational seedbed for an Engineer ghost world. The planet was harmless, dull and old; even that cloud spot might be older than mankind, he realized —

Again he was being watched.

A vast speculation thrilled through him. The huge Qax he had detected earlier, with thoughts like hours...

It was here. In the spot system. The whole self-organizing complex contained the awareness of the Qax, and it was studying him.

He opened himself. New data trickled into his awareness.

The function of the Xeelee ship was to optimize the chances of survival of its human occupants.

It studied the ancient Jovian and considered how this might be achieved.

Once this System had been the home of a race who had waged war for hundreds of millennia. The Jovian had been reworked to serve as the hub of an industrial-military conurbation which had launched wave after wave of strikes out at the humans' perceived foe, the Xeelee. The ship saw how even the moons had been moved to their present altitudes, their orbits regularized, to serve as weapons shops. Power for the shops, and for the great fleets which had poured out of this system, had come from the substance of the Jovian itself.

Now, of course, the war was history, the human fleets brushed aside; the shops were deserted and the Jovian was largely spent — but still, the ship perceived, entities remained brooding at its core, vast machine-minds waiting to fulfil their final purpose —

The last defence of the Solar System.

They saw the Xeelee ship, with its cargo of two primitive humans, as a threat. And they had attacked.

The ship was not amused, or offended, by this assault. It methodically studied the weak tractor beam which was drawing it steadily towards the Jovian.

Gravity wave technology — called by the humans "starbreaker beams" — had been one of the many Xeelee mysteries never solved by man, even after generations of study. The ship now recognized this tractor as a pale imitation of a starbreaker; and it made out, somewhere near the core of the Jovian, the generator which served as the core of the



tractor. A group of point-singularities were being impelled, by strong electrical fields, to collide and coalesce. As pairs of the ultradense singularities impacted a new, more massive, hole would form; for some seconds the new hole's event horizon would vibrate like a soap bubble, emitting intense gravitational waves. By controlling the pattern of such collisions the modes of vibration of the horizons could be controlled — and thus, indirectly, the tractor beam of gravity waves was generated.

Well, it was a bit rough and ready; but, the ship conceded, it worked. After a fashion.

Now to the options.

It could simply spread its wings and fly away, of course. But there would be a period, a second or so, when its discontinuity-drive impulse would match the tug of the tractor beam; and when the beam was broken the ship and its occupants could suffer a jolt.

The ship assessed the (low) probability of damage to the humans.

The second option was simpler and, the ship concluded, entailed less risk.

It fired its starbreaker, straight down the throat of the tractor.

Sura cried out and covered her eyes; Erwal, squinting, saw how the panel's brightness dimmed to a point where she could see again.

She still looked along the curtain-tube to the sun-world. But now a beam of intense cherry-red light threaded out of the ship and along the tube's axis, spearing the heart of the sun-world. Around the point of impact the sun-world glowed yellow-white; the stain of sunlight spread until it covered perhaps a quarter of the globe's huge area.

The curtain flickered, fragmented, faded; the red beam flicked off, as if doused.

Sura lowered her hands cautiously. "Is it over?"

"I think so."

"What happened?"

Erwal changed the panel view to look out over the blocky building-world landscape, now brightly lit by the revived sun-world. "It's worked, whatever it was. We're no longer rising."

Sura stared up at the panel. "But — look..."

The world was no longer dead.

Lights flickered on across the landscape; clear yellow or blue radiance poured from the doorways of the abandoned structures. Now some of the buildings began to rise from the ground, and Erwal was reminded of flowers which seek the sun; soon the buildings were straining up at the sun-world, their cables singing taut, and amphitheatres reached out like open palms; and for a moment she saw the city-world as its builders must have intended it: as a place of vibrant power and industry.

Erwal felt her throat constricting. Why, she thought, it is beautiful after all. I just wasn't seeing it right. But already the revived sun-world light was fading; the buildings sank uncertainly to the ground, their interior illumination cooling to

darkness.

It had lasted no more than a minute.

Sura said, "I think I'd like to go home now."

"Yes."

The ship spread its wings over the city-world for the last time.

During his studies on the Sugar Lump Paul had learned of the history of the Qax, the odd, vast creatures who had spawned as constructs of convection cells in a boiling ocean. Paul's captor, constructed of the virtual particle sets of the seething vacuum, resembled its forebears as a laser rifle resembles a piece of chipped stone. But it could trace its consciousness back to that boiling sea.

And it remembered the human, Jim Bolder, who had caused the Qax sun to nova.

The pathetic Qax evacuation armada had consisted of hundreds of Spline ships. The craft, their spherical hulls open, had settled into the Qax ocean. Each hull had been lined with heaters designed to simulate the vulcanism of that mother sea; convection cells had been stirred to life inside the ships, and the awareness of a Qax slid reluctantly aboard each craft.

Paul's captor recalled its own Spline carrier lifting cautiously from the amniotic ocean. Flares like human fists already punched out of the sun, and gales howled through the atmosphere, buffeting the stately rise of the Spline. With each jolt the delicate convection pattern was disrupted; the Qax, alone, endured the gradual paring away of its awareness.

Over half the race died.

But after the evacuation the inventiveness and enterprise of the Qax were reasserted, and soon traders were once more spreading Qax goods and services through the neighbouring star systems. And the Qax, adrift in their Spline fleet, began to explore new homes for their delicate structures.

They were creatures of turbulence, and they found turbulence everywhere.

Soon Qax awareness took root in the roiling air of Jovians... in the slow, stately gravitational rhythms of galactic orbits... and at last they learned how to colonise the structure of seething space itself.

On their reemergence as an interstellar power the Qax sought out humanity, but — as Bolder in his blundering way had evidently hoped — the Qax's long, forced withdrawal from affairs had given mankind time to grow powerful. The history of the two species diverged, with the Qax beginning their introspective retreat into the structure of space, while the humans surged up into their epic conflicts with the Xeelee.

Now the humans were nearly gone, and the Qax were numberless, and had become immortal. But they remembered the moment at which a single human being had brought them to the brink of extinction.

Paul, his awareness tightly focused on the Jovian's roiling storms, began to piece together an

understanding of the future plans of the Qax.

Unlike most baryonic species the Qax would be able to coexist with the dark matter Engineers. On the whole the Qax inhabited the turbulent, twilight depths of low-energy systems. It would not matter to the Jovian's Qax parasite, for example, if, thanks to the Engineers, its host's distant star failed to shine; as long as the planet turned and its inner core glowed with heat the Qax could survive.

So the Qax might become the last baryonic inhabitants of the universe.

Eventually, though, the energy sources which fuelled the turbulence sustaining the Qax would run dry. This Jovian would grow cold, exhausted by its own weather. Then, at last, it would be time for the Qax to leave. There would be a second Qax exodus, on a far vaster scale than the first, as the race followed the Xeelee through their Ring to a fresh cosmos. Paul speculated wildly on the container vessel which could store a consciousness based on the rhythms of galactic orbits...

But the Qax weren't yet troubled by such problems. They were aware that the Engineers would probably close the Ring eventually: having won the universe the Engineers would want to seal themselves into it. But the Engineers still had plenty of room for expansion, and so, the Qax judged, there was plenty of time.

And besides, the Qax had another project to complete. A loose end.

The final destruction of humanity.

The Qax had waited through man's brief, vainglorious morning as he grew to dominate the species around him — only to waste his strength in the absurd assaults on the Xeelee. Eventually the Xeelee had gently sealed the majority of the surviving humans in the box world beyond the Eight Rooms. Some small colonies of people in various forms had survived, however, and the Qax had watched as, one by one, these remnants dwindled and expired.

Paul suspected that the Qax had not been reluctant to speed this process.

Now the universe seemed at last empty of men. But after the actions of Jim Bolder the Qax judged that even a small group of humans represented a risk to the long-term survival of the Qax. So the Qax would ensure that men would never again rise to threaten the species with their unpredictable plans.

They waited.

Eventually Teal had appeared in the Eighth Room.

Paul wondered wistfully why the Qax had not been disturbed when the antiXeelee had revived Paul himself; slowly he came to understand that he was not sufficiently human for the Qax to recognize him, and only by his association with the villagers had they come to learn what he was.

He experienced a profound sadness.

The Qax had been heartened by the descent into savagery evidenced by the nature of Teal and those who followed him. They could, of course, have destroyed the humans at any time. But they had been patient. It was clear that there were more

humans within and beyond the Rooms, still inaccessible to the Qax; and it was also clear that the humans could have only one plan of action: to take the Xeelee ship across the lost universe to Bolder's Ring.

For that last voyage, surely, all the humans would emerge from the protection of the Rooms; all of humanity would be contained in a single, fragile craft, undertaking an exodus with ironic parallels to the evacuation forced on the Qax so long ago.

Then the Qax would strike.

Paul considered. There was no anger or passion behind the plan. The Qax's enmity to humanity had endured for millions of years; it had gone beyond anger or even calculation and had metamorphosed into a species imperative.

It was ironic that until his entrapment by the Qax Paul had imagined that the humans' greatest source of danger would be the rampant Engineers. Now he found it difficult to envisage how the little band of humans could run the gauntlet of this ancient enemy and survive their passage to the Ring.

Time wore away on its various scales. The Qax did not molest him, content for now to absorb information. Paul set up an array of sub-personalities to debate options for the survival of the humans.

At length he made a decision.

She missed Damen.

Surely he would enjoy slipping his hands into these mittens and driving the ship as if it were some great bird. She imagined him here in the Eight Rooms sitting with the rest, semi-naked and glistening with sweat, gaining rolls of healthy fat —

But the image crumbled. In Damen's heart, she reflected sadly, there would never have been the will to confront the strangeness of the ship, the Friend. And now she had lost him forever. He, stubborn, would never travel to the Eight Rooms, and her companions would never agree to a return journey...

Then she had an idea.

The ship rested in its place against the Eighth Room.

Erwal sat at her table and slipped her hands once more into the mittens; and she walked the point of view of the panel over her head and out through the Eight Rooms.

Belatedly she realized that the mitten controls were coarse, intended to take the window-eyes through miles at a time; soon her fingers and thumbs ached with the strain of keeping the limited motion smooth. With practice, though, she was soon able to move the focus over the heads of the oblivious villagers and out through the door of the first Room.

She flinched as the point of view passed through the unopened door.

She hovered over a plain of dirty snow. She found herself shivering — but, of course, the panel brought her only the look of the ice land, not the sound of the wind, the bite of frost. With a twist of

her thumbs she rotated her view so that she was looking back at the first Room. It hovered in the air, complete and plain, giving no indication of the wonders which lay beyond it.

"It's as if we were out there looking at it."

Erwal turned. Sura stood behind her chair, hands clasped meekly behind her back. "Why are you looking at all that snow and ice?" the girl asked. "It makes me feel cold."

Erwal reflected how young Sura looked; it was as if the warm safety of the Rooms, the ship, had restored to her the youth rubbed away by the cold of the village. "...I'm not sure. I suppose I miss it."

Muscles in the girl's cheeks stood out like ropes. "Well, I don't."

"I want to... ah, walk the window back to the village. But I'm not sure if I can find it again."

"I'll help you." Sura sat on the floor, folding her legs beneath her. "You go south from the Rooms. Look for the tree where we found Teal's marker."

"South... Yes."

The focus moved at little more than walking pace over the icescape. Erwal and Sura peered at the screen searching for pointers in the blank terrain. Gradually Erwal learned to sweep the focus through miles in a few minutes, stopping occasionally at some vantage point to gain fresh bearings.

It was so easy, compared to the deadly pain of the real trip, that Erwal felt ashamed.

As the hours wore by other villagers observed what she was doing. Slowly a circle of them built up; some of them offered bits of advice while others preferred to keep their distance, simply watching. Erwal made no comment.

Eventually they found the tree stump to which still clung a flap of cow skin. Sura placed her hand on Erwal's back; the fingers pinched painfully at Erwal's muscles. The villagers stared at the rag, subdued and silent.

After another day of surrogate travelling, with Erwal's hands aching, the panel-eyes came at last to the village.

Snow lay in drifts against the crushed teepees. No smoke rose. Mummy cows lay in great mounds of snow, exposed flesh frozen to their bones.

Erwal snatched the viewpoint into the air, so that it was as if they were looking down at the ruins of a toy village.

Man's last enemy, winter, had won. Somewhere Sand lowed softly. Arke gently laid his palm on Erwal's head. Erwal probed at her emotions, seeking grief. Then she turned the panels opaque and drew her hands from the gloves.

The villagers were quiet, but after a few hours they returned to their lazy, peaceful shipboard life. Erwal found herself relaxing with the rest, and soon it was as if the images on the panels had been no more than a feverish dream...

Later, though, Erwal climbed alone through the Rooms to the first and pushed open the door. The cold air sliced into her lungs. Barefoot, dressed only in a tunic, she staggered into the knee-deep snow. Suddenly her grief was as tangible as the frozen ground beneath her feet. She gave herself to

it and tears froze to her eyes and cheeks.

His scheme, his sub-units concurred, was as unlikely and improbable as any of the wild ventures undertaken by humans in the past. Its only merit was that it was better than allowing the Qax simply to crush the fragile Xeelee ship.

The plan hinged on the fact that the humans faced two dangers: from the Qax and from the dark matter Engineers. The Engineers were vastly more powerful, but the Qax, with their unswervable intent, represented the greater immediate danger. Clearly the humans could not fight through either — let alone both — of these great powers to the goal of the Ring.

Well, then: the foes must be diverted.

Paul withdrew subtly from the Jovian world. He was aware that the Qax were watching him, but they did not try to interfere. He diffused the foci of his awareness and spread himself as thinly as possible along the quantum worldlines. He organized the data comprising his consciousness into a particular configuration, an empty, interrogative form.

Like a child seeking its mother he called the antiXeelee.

The antiXeelee had left the universe at the launch of the Sugar Lump seed fleet. It had travelled back in time with its fleet, and — simultaneously, and without paradox — had dissolved into countless melting fragments of awareness. So the antiXeelee had gone... but Paul inhabited a quantum universe in which nothing was ever final. With patience and watchfulness he maintained his call.

...Fragments of the antiXeelee replied. It was like an echo of a lost voice. A pale outline of the awareness of the antiXeelee was reconstructed in response to the demands of Paul, and again Paul was surrounded by the its vast, passionless humour. He responded as best he could, endeavouring to strengthen the presence of the antiXeelee. He sensed confusion in the hierarchy of the Qax, but Paul ignored them. He wasn't after the Qax right now.

At last the response he was waiting for came. Ghost ships miles wide coasted through the Jovian's system.

The presence of the antiXeelee might signify to an alert observer that the Xeelee had returned to the cosmos, and — as Paul had hoped — the Xeelee nemesis, the dark matter Engineers, had come to find out what was going on.

Paul, straining, maintained the illusion/substance of the antiXeelee. At length the dark matter ships departed with, Paul intended, a new purpose.

He relaxed and the antiXeelee outline subsided into the quantum hiss of the universe.

The Engineers, convinced that the Xeelee might invade the universe from which they had been driven, would abandon their projects and focus their energies on Bolder's Ring. That gateway had to be closed before the Xeelee could use it to return.

...But if the Ring were closed the Qax would be

trapped in a dying universe, their dream of species immortality threatened. So, Paul calculated, the Qax would have to get to the Ring and stop the Engineers from destroying it. With a sense of amusement and fascination he watched the urgent debate of the Qax, the data and propositions chattering across scales of space and time.

Forgotten, Paul allowed himself to exult. His scheme seemed to be working. If so he had not only afforded the remnants of humanity a chance: he had also changed the species imperatives of two great races.

He slid along the quantum net to his little band of humans.

Across the universe vast forces began to converge on Bolder's Ring.

The Friend had returned. And the visions were so vivid she could hardly see.

...A place, unimaginably far away, where a Ring, sparkling and perfect, turned in space; a place where all the starlight was blue...

"Erwal? Are you all right?"

The fantastic pictures overlaid Sura's concerned face. Erwal rubbed the leathery skin around her eyes. Her sight clouded by other worlds, she clung to comforting fragments of reality: the sound of children's laughter, the sweet, milky scent of the mummy cow. "I'm all right. Just a little dizzy, perhaps. I need to sit down..." With Sura's help she touched the warm, soft wall of the Room and, as if blind, worked her way to the floor and sat down.

...She soared over the vast, glittering Ring; her fingers trembled in the glove-controls...

She opened her eyes, shuddering.

Sura sat down beside her, still holding her hand. "It isn't just dizziness, is it?"

"...No." Erwal hesitated, longing to unburden herself. "Sura, I think we have to travel again. Go away from here."

Sura's grip tightened. "Brave the snow again? But —"

"No, you don't understand. In the ship. We have to travel in the ship."

"But where to?"

"...I don't really know."

Sura said slowly, "Why do we have to go? I don't understand. How do you know all this? You're frightening me, Erwal."

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to. But I don't think I can explain. And..." And I'm frightened too, she told herself. Not by the mysterious visions — not any more — but by what they represented: a journey the likes of which no human had undertaken for a million years.

She didn't want to go. She wanted to stay here, in the warmth; she didn't want to face any more danger and uncertainty. But the visions were powerful, much more so than before; it was as if the Friend were screaming into her face.

The Friend was frightened, she realized suddenly. And what could such a godlike creature be fearful about?

"We have to go," she said. She could feel Sura's



hand grow stiff in hers. "You think I'm mad, don't you?" she asked gently.

"No, Erwal, but —"

"For now you'll have to trust me," Erwal said, keeping her voice as steady as she could. "Look, I've been right in the past. About the healing panels, and the food boxes. Haven't I?"

"...Yes."

"Well, now I'll be right again. We're in great danger. And to escape it we have to go to this other place." The visions cleared briefly — miraculously — and she was afforded a glimpse of Sura's wide eyes. "Sura, we'll be safe in the ship. We'll be warm and dry."

Slowly the girl nodded. "It can't be worse than the snow."

"That's right," Erwal said firmly. "Not as bad as the snow."

After a time Sura said: "What do you want me to do?"

It took the fattened, slow-moving villagers several days to organize themselves to Erwal's satisfaction.

Not everyone was willing to come, of course. Some decided to stay behind in the Eight Rooms, unwilling to gamble their security and warmth on Erwal's would provision the travellers, and so Sand, the last mummy cow in the world, was left behind to sustain the rest.

Erwal found it hard to blame the stay-behinds.

After so much hardship together the leavetaking was protracted and difficult, each villager sensing that there would never be a reunion. Erwal stroked the stubby hairs at the root of the mummy cow's trunk; huge, absurd tears leaked from Sand's eyes.

At last it was over. The stay-behinds gathered in the Eighth Room. Arke was among them, and Erwal studied his round face, trying to imagine his future, locked up in these tiny Rooms. The children would grow, of course, and perhaps have children of their own — why not? The bones of the dead would be laid in the snow outside, in rising middens, and time would pass without incident; until finally the faithful mummy cow succumbed to age, and the people died with her.

Surely the human story was not meant to end like this, with the last men hiding away in a box. Abruptly Erwal felt restless, anxious to depart.

Arke pushed at the door control; the crystal panel slid across the face of the Eighth Room. The ship was cast free. Erwal's group gathered in a nervous huddle at the centre of the ship's chamber. Erwal, self-conscious, strode across the cabin to her familiar seat and slipped her hands once more into the magical gloves.

The ship unfurled its night-dark wings. She closed her eyes, feeling a surge of exhilaration. The Friend was with her: the barrage of visions had mercifully ceased, but she could sense his presence, as if he were standing behind her, grave and quiet.

It was time.

She summoned up a memory of the sparkling

Ring —

— the ship quivered —

— and abruptly the Friend flooded her memory-picture with colour and detail; determination flowed through her into the gloves and —

— jump —

It was like a stumble, a fall. There were screams behind her. She looked up, startled, at the panel-windows: the pale lines of the Eighth Room had vanished, to be replaced by a ball of fire, vast, red, brooding; flames as big as worlds licked out at the ship and —

— jump —

— and another jolt and the fire was replaced by nothing, nothing at all, and —

— jump —

— there was a tilted disc of colour; she saw reds and browns and golds and it was so lovely it made her gasp but —

— jump —

— it was gone and —

— jump — jump — jumpjumpjump....

Images battered against the screens like gaudy snowflakes.

She switched off the screens. The panels emptied and turned silver-grey, and there was a sigh of relief from her companions. But the jumps continued; she could feel them as a soft flutter in her stomach.

Cautiously she withdrew her hands from the gloves, stared at the mittens as if they had betrayed her. She had thought she understood the ship; now she had been humbled, a child at the feet of the adults. She sensed the Friend's strained reassurance but took little comfort. I hope you know what you're doing, she thought savagely. Maybe we're more stupid than you know. Or... more fragile.

Paul sensed the bafflement of the woman and anguish infiltrated his partial personalities. He had known that the initiation of the Xeelee hyperdrive would terrify the humans, but there was little he could do to protect them.

There was no time for this introspection. Putting aside his guilt he grasped his wave function web; and his awareness flowed onwards to the scene of the final battle.

In their borrowed Xeelee ship the little group of humans hurtled across the hostile universe.

The Barrier was deserted: across a million light years the puddled supernova ruins had been abandoned.

The Engineers had gone to make war.

Paul, unsettled, brooded over the forces he had unleashed. Then he moved past the spacetime gash of the Barrier and slid down the smooth face of the Ring's gravity well.

As he approached the centre of the well the blue shift intensified, until he was surrounded by a hard rain of photons. And through that rain galaxies fell like vast, doomed ships, their fragile superstructures increasingly distorted by the curve of space. At last Paul reached a place where the

tumbling galaxies were torn apart: he found fragments of spiral arm, black and furious galactic cores, and huge clouds of hydrogen-rich gas that might — but for the work of the Xeelee — have borne new stars.

Finally there was only a storm of stars.

...And then he reached the bottom of the gravity pit, the place all the stars were falling into, the place where all the worldlines terminated.

He reassembled his awareness and surveyed his surroundings. It was just as the ancient explorer, Bolder, had described. Across millions of light years stars fell into this place, but here at the heart there was a hollow in the cascade of stars, a globe of stillness thousands of light years wide. And at the centre of the chamber the Xeelee Ring turned, glittering and beautiful — and obviously artificial.

Paul could study it as Bolder never had. With relish he sent sub-personalities skating along the tangled quantum functions that reached deep into the Ring's stretched spacetime.

The surface of the great artefact, Paul found, moved at half the speed of light, so that a large fraction of its mass must consist purely of rotational kinetic energy. And on that surface glittered facets, flat as machined metal and yet wider than stars. Still more astonishing was the substance of the Ring. It was so dense, Paul realized, that it could surely be sustained only by the strong nuclear force, the power which locked quarks into nucleons... So the Ring was like a vast nucleon; it was a single quantum-mechanical object, surely the largest in the universe. Paul's quantum awareness, accustomed to a thin, vaporous universe in which quantum functions were scattered like straws in a wind, thrilled at the scale and power of it all.

Most startling of all was the Ring's central region.

Through the void at the heart of the Ring he could see blue-shifted starlight muddled, stirred. Here the wave functions were tangled, twisted, broken; here space was folded up like cheap cloth. This distortion was the purpose of the Ring: this was the Kerr-metric interface, the gateway through which the Xeelee had made their escape. And this was the breach in the universe which the dark matter Engineers were determined to close... And, Paul quickly realized, they had already started work.

Ghostly ships slid past the surface of the Ring, blurring its gleaming facets. Paul widened his perception to embrace the entire Ring, and everywhere the ships of the Engineers moved, silent and purposeful. Somehow the great artifact seemed helpless, and Paul felt an absurd impulse to hurl himself forward, to try to protect the glorious baryonic monument.

At length the Engineers appeared to come to a decision. A knot of ships formed around one section of the toroid — perhaps some weak point — and from all around the Ring more ships flickered in short hyperdrive hops to join the growing throng. Soon only a few scouts were left near outlying parts of the Ring, and around the weak point there was a swarm of shadow ships so thick they dimmed the

Ring's glitter.

Cautiously Paul slid his awareness focus closer to the stricken region. Soon it was as if he were suspended mere miles above the surface of the Ring. Below him a plain of diamond bathed in blue-shifted light stretched to a knife-sharp horizon — and the Ring itself soared out of the flat landscape like a pair of vast, shining roads in the air which met in a thread of blue at the limits of vision. He imagined a civilization evolving on this facet-scape. What legends would they tell of those twin roads? What cosmologies would they assemble?

...But the Engineers' ships crossed and recrossed the surface of the artifact, dimming its beauty. With some analogue of a sigh, Paul focused his attention.

The Engineers, he realized, were now passing into the structure of the Ring itself. Awe filled him: after all the Ring's material was bound by the strong nuclear force, yet the Engineers were piercing it as easily as if sliding knives into water. Soon the ghost-grey ships were jostling in their eagerness to breach the lovely surface; and, within minutes, a slice through the Ring — extremely thin, no more than a light-year wide — began to turn a dull yellow. Splinters thousands of miles long flaked from the surface, passing unimpeded through the ranks of ships.

The Engineers were cutting the Ring, Paul realized uneasily, and it didn't appear that it would take them very long. And his little band of humans was still hours away.

He swept over the plain of the Ring and studied the turbulent space at its centre. Thanks to the activities of the Engineers the Kerr-metric zone was like a pond into which gravel was being thrown. Star images rippled, and the interuniversal surface was awash with a milky blue light. Already the access paths through the zone must be disrupted, and —

— and a shock wave of gravitational radiation burst over him.

Rapidly he withdrew his attention foci from the surface of the Ring and rose to the roof of its star-walled chamber, so that it was as if he were an insect in some vast cathedral. Something monstrous had erupted into this region of space, mere light-minutes away from him. He surveyed the space around the Ring, seeking the source of the gravitational radiation.

...It had burst out of hyperspace like a fist. At first Paul could make out nothing but a blaze of blue-shifted photons and gravitons. Then, gradually, he perceived its structure. It was a sphere a million miles wide. Fusion fires still burned within it, although its structure had clearly been badly damaged by its impact at near-light speed with the debris in the Ring chamber: great gobbets of material showered from its surface, so that it left a trail like some impossible comet as it blazed, Paul saw, towards the throng of Engineer ships.

It looked like a ball of ice-cream thrown into a bank of live steam. But it was a star; a star that had been accelerated to near light speed and then

launched through hyperspace. And it was aimed directly at the Engineers' centre of operations.

This was a weapon of war. The Qax had arrived.

After that things began to happen fast.

For days the ship had hurtled on.

Erwal knew she had no real understanding of the distances she was travelling, but she could sense how far she was being separated from the place of her birth.

And she and her companions were utterly alone. Even the Friend had withdrawn once more.

From time to time she slid her hands into the gloves and felt the continuing surge of the marvellous ship. And occasionally — when her companions were asleep — she would open one of the panel-windows and stare gloomily at the bright spheres which battered against the panel like vast insects, or at the distant pools of muddy light which sailed more slowly by.

Inside the ship there was, of course, no pattern of day and night by which to measure time, but Erwal counted the sleep periods that passed during the journey. Soon after the fourteenth she became aware, through the subtle touch of the gloves, of a change in the ship's motion.

Hastily, still blinking sleep from her eyes, she opened a panel-window.

The barrage of stars was visibly slowing, and the motion of the distant pools of light was almost gone. Had they arrived, then? She peered at the screen.

A wall of starlight, muddled and blue-stained, blocked off the sky. She stared, awed.

Her companions stirred in their nests of rags on the floor. Hastily she shut off the panel and sat in her chair, wondering what to do now.

The Qax assault approached its climax.

The hijacked star was mere minutes away from impact with the workplace of the dark matter Engineers, and its hellish glow brought a million dancing highlights from Bolder's Ring. Now Qax-controlled Spline ships cracked out of hyperspace in the wake of the star, their fleshy hulls sparkling with weapons fire. Paul saw how the Engineers were responding; insubstantial ships emerged from the Ring material like spirits from wet earth and approached the Qax vanguard.

One Engineer ship got too close to the star. Paul watched raging gravitational radiation tear open the craft's structure as if rending apart a spider's web. Within seconds the wreck had dispersed, fragile as a smoke ring.

...And, just at this crucial instant, a little clump of consciousness knots popped out of hyperspace, emerging just outside the clear space around the Ring.

The humans had arrived. Paul hurried to them.

Wings outspread, the Xeelee ship hurtled through a storm of light.

The panel-window showed blue stars, hundreds of them jammed together, some so close

they were joined by umbilici of fire. The villagers stood and stared, transfixed. Children clung to the legs of their parents and cried softly.

"Turn it off!" Sura buried her face in her hands. "I can't bear to look at it; turn it off!"

Erwal gripped the gloves grimly. "I can't," she said.

The Friend was in her head again, his visions a clamour that left her unable to think.

Onwards, he said. She had to go onwards, deeper into this swarm of insect-stars, using all the skills she had learned to haul the ship through this barrage of stars. Tears leaked out of her eyes, but she dared not rest. Her world narrowed to the feel of the gloves on her stiffening hands, the gritty rain of stars in her eyes.

With a soundless explosion the ship erupted into clear space.

Erwal gasped, pulled her hands out of the gloves; the ship seemed to skid to a halt.

They were in an amphitheatre of light. The far wall was a bank of stars, hard and blue; it curved into a floor and ceiling also made of blue-tinged starstuff. And at the centre of the vast chamber was a jewel, a Ring that turned, huge and delicate. One point of the Ring was marred by smoke; red and blue light flickered in that cloud.

Erwal felt Sura touch the crown of her head. The girl's hand seemed to be trembling, and Erwal laid her own hand over Sura's — then realized that the trembling was her own, that her whole body was shaking uncontrollably.

Sura asked, "Are you all right?"

"...I think so."

"Where are we?" Sura pointed. "What's that?"

Erwal tried to smile. "I haven't the faintest idea," she said gently.

"It's beautiful. Do you think it's some kind of building? Why, it must be miles wide."

But Erwal barely heard. Once more the Friend clamoured in her thoughts, pressing, demanding; she longed to shut him out —

Without hesitation she shoved her hands back into the gloves. The Xeelee ship plummeted into hyperspace.

The weapon-star burned through the ranks of Engineers' ships towards the Ring. Vast as it was the star was lost against that great carcass...

Until it hit.

The battered star collapsed as if made of smoke. Sheets of hydrogen, some of it still burning at star-core temperatures, splashed from the crystalline surface of the Ring. A star's mass was reduced from light speed to stationary in less than a minute; Paul watched huge shock waves race around the Ring's structure like muscles writhing under flesh.

Now the Qax's Spline warships followed up the starstrike; cherry-red beams lanced from their weapon pits, and Paul recalled the Xeelee gravity-wave starbreaker cannons observed by Jim Bolder. Engineer ships imploded around the beams, turning into transient columns of smoke that shone with

exotic radiations and then dispersed. For a brief, exhilarating moment, Paul speculated on the possibility of a Qax victory, a defeat for the Engineers after this single, astonishing blitzkrieg; and he felt an unexpected surge of baryonic chauvinism.

Soundlessly he cheered on the Qax.

But, within thirty minutes, the debris of the starstrike was cooling and dispersing. The Engineer fleets began to regroup, gliding unimpeded through the glowing wreckage of the star. Grimly the Qax fought on; but now, from all around the Ring, Engineer ships were flicking through hyperspace to join the battle, and soon the marauding Qax were surrounded. The Spline armada, with foe in all directions, became a brief, short-blossoming flower of cherry-red light.

Soon the end was beyond question. Ghostly Engineer craft penetrated the Spline fleet and overlaid the battered Qax ships, and the Spline, their effective masses increased enormously, began to implode, to melt inwards one by one.

Perhaps if the Qax had taken more time, Paul mused; perhaps if they had organized a barrage of starstrikes... Perhaps, perhaps.

Soon it was evident that the assault had been no more than a temporary inconvenience for the Engineers, and the shadowy fleets were sliding once more into the Ring's crumbling surface.

Dropping out of hyperspace was like falling through ice.

The panel-window filled with light, but Erwal, disoriented, could make no sense of the image: of the band of crystal-blue light that crossed the picture, of the sea of milky, muddled stars below her. Was that band the Ring? Then they must be very close to it, poised over its centre. And what was the meaning of the crushed, twisted starlight below?

The Friend returned, screaming visions at her. She cried out, but she grasped the gloves.

Xeelee nightwings stretched across space for the last time. Ignored by the warring fleets, the ship dived towards the Kerr-metric interface.

As Erwal entered the sea of light there was a moment of farewell, an instant of almost unbearable pain... and then the Friend was gone.

She dropped into strangeness.

Paul, sombre, reflected that the destruction of the Ring had in the end provided the key racial goal for the human race. But now that the end was close the last human — Paul — felt nothing but a cultured sadness, an aesthetic pain at the loss of such power and beauty.

The surviving Qax, too, were no more than impotent observers, ignored by the Engineers.

The ghost-grey cosmionic ships slid through the Ring's pale flesh and its bruise-like discoloration spread. After about half a year the Engineers withdrew. The fruit of their labour was a slice through the Ring perhaps a light year thick that was gold speckled with grey. Around this darkling slice

the substance of the Ring was crumbling, turning to sparkling clouds that drifted away from the structure. It was as if some vile cancer had entered the flesh of the Ring, drying it out and reducing it to a fine dust.

The Kerr-metric interface wavered, dissolved; and the universe was sealed.

Within weeks the dust clouds had cleared, and Paul saw that a clean slice had been cut through the Ring. Paul moved his attention foci closer to the gap. The inner surfaces of the breached Ring were twin discs light years wide, fields of fire like the splayed-out skins of stars. They shrivelled from the wound, so that the gap in the Ring widened at near-light speed.

Engineer ships cavorted around the wound as if in a triumphant dance.

The vast structure had no mechanism to recover from such a wound. Now there was only its long, slow death to play out; and the Engineers, evidently incurious, began to withdraw, returning their attention to their own mysterious projects.

Paul, suspended in his quantum spiderweb, relaxed his time sense.

The Ring was a thousand light years wide. The destruction of its structure, spreading at light speed from the Engineers' clinical incision, would take three thousand years. After about five hundred years the planar surfaces bounding the widening break were growing ragged; mountains and valleys light years deep scored the fiery surfaces, and the substance of the Ring was falling away in larger pieces. Slabs the size of the solar system flew out into the shell of blue-shifted stars, cutting swathes like huge teethmarks.

Paul followed the progress of one such fragment, a roughly rectangular slab a million miles thick and a light-day on a side. It smashed through stars as casually as a hand through a cloud of fireflies. One star, a heavy, battered white dwarf, was crushed against the plate, and for a few hours fusion-hot starstuff seethed against the Ring material. When the fire had died away the bulk of the star material — hydrogen and helium — had evaporated, leaving a cooling puddle of complex compounds, a stain on the Ring surface perhaps a million miles wide. It was like a sea, heated by blue-shifted starlight. Fuelled by the hard radiation from the sky chemical evolution in this ocean was rapid, and soon a simple biochemistry was underway. Paul followed this, fascinated. Suppose life emerged from that strange sea — intelligence, even; he imagined a race of spindly near-humans standing on the Ring material at the shore of their life-giving ocean (they would need to remain at least aquaphibian, of course, as there would be no possibility of colonizing the Ringstuff landscape). They would peer out over a plate-shaped world, flat, airless and forever uninhabitable, and stare up into a tunnel of blue-shifted stars.

...But, sadly, this was fantasy. Long before any complex systems had time to evolve, the Ring fragment, still hurtling at near-light speed, emerged from the dense layer of material around the Ring.

The flat world's sky grew dark and cold, and the strange ocean froze and lay still.

Now only a narrowing segment of the Ring remained; but, since the fragment was insulated by the constraints of light-speed from the devastation of the rest of the structure, it continued to whirl through space as if the rest of the Ring were still intact. Then the last few light-years of Ring were consumed by the flames. The twin discs of fire completed their three-thousand-year journey and met with a soundless clap; almost anticlimactically they melted against each other and dispersed like smoke.

Where the Ring had been there was only a toroidal cloud of gold dust.

Like sea waves from the wreck of some wondrous ship gravity radiation surged out of the Ring's gravitational well, and at last the vast pit in spacetime began to close. The observers — the Qax, the last Engineer envoys — began to leave the scene. Paul grasped his quantum threads and slipped into the gathering darkness.

It could have been worse. They could have ended up anywhere.

The Xeelee ship emerged from the Kerr-metric interface. It furled its wings, slid to a halt, and sent its sensors probing into the new universe.

Erwal stared at a screen suddenly empty of the gaudy sparkle of the Ring. She saw darkness broken only by a random scattering of globes of crimson light; the globes, receding into the distance, looked like the haloes of torches in a blizzard.

Sura asked, "What does it mean?"

Erwal frowned. "I don't know. We're in a different kind of sky now."

"Did we pass through the Ring?"

Erwal competently swung the focus of the panel-window back the way they had come. There was no sign of the Ring. The screen showed only the red globes, rank upon rank of them.

"I don't understand," Sura said. "What should we do?"

"How could I know?" Erwal snapped. "We wait, I suppose."

Sura stepped away, uncertain.

After some hours of changeless scenery Erwal slid her hands out of the control gloves, climbed out of her chair and stretched painfully.

Trying to overcome her enormous sense of anticlimax she established a routine. After each of the next few sleeps she crossed to the control table, activated the panel-windows, and conscientiously swept the area. But there was no change, and gradually her routine broke down.

She was tired, and she had had enough mystery. She tried to settle into life inside this odd ship-village and forget the strangeness outside.

The function of the Xeelee ship was to optimize the chances of survival of its human occupants. It studied the purposeless emptiness stretching around it and considered how this might be achieved.

Superstars hung around it in clouds, reaching to the limits of this expanding universe. There was no evidence of intelligence, or life.

The ratio of helium to hydrogen here was about twenty-five percent. This, and various other cosmological relics, told the Xeelee ship that this universe had emerged from its singularity in a broadly similar fashion to that of the universe of its origin, with comparable ratios between the fundamental forces. This, of course, was good news. It meant that there was at least a chance that the ship's human occupants could survive the exhaustion of the ship's own energy stores. Suppose, for example, that gravity had turned out rather higher; then stars like Earth's sun would implode before forming — but, on the other hand, if gravity had been somewhat lower this universe would be filled with vague, structureless clouds of unfused hydrogen.

Perhaps some property of the Ring had guided them to an inhabitable environment, the ship wondered.

It did not spend much processing time on such theorizing. After all, speculation was not its primary function; and even if it were, there was no one to report back to.

So the universe was broadly similar to that once shared by man and Xeelee. With one important difference.

It was much younger.

Less than a billion years had passed since the singularity here. The universe was filled with superstars — balls of fusing hydrogen millions of times wider than Sol, each of them capable of outshining the galaxies which were yet to form. There had been such stars in the early history of the ship's home universe; destined to die rapidly and implode, they left no sign of their existence save a blip in the cosmic background radiation and a few evaporating black holes.

So the universe was young. From the ship's point of view the problem with that was that there was virtually no iron, no carbon, no silicon — no oxygen. Save for the helium and a few traces of more complex elements which had emerged from the singularity, there was only hydrogen. All the heavy elements would become abundant much later, when true stars began to shine and complex fusion processes in their cores got underway.

There were no Earths to land the humans on, no air for them to breathe, no metals for them to dig.

Fortunately it wasn't that big a problem.

The ship unfurled its nightdark wings and dove into the nearest superstar. Cherry-red starbreaker beams blasted ahead of the ship; the gravity waves lanced through convection cells billions of miles wide, and a cylinder of roiling hydrogen-helium gathered. Within the cylinder the fusion temperatures rose by millions of degrees and complex fusion chains, comparable to those in the cores of the stars yet to form, were initiated.

A cascade of heavy elements emerged from the fires, and at last even a few atoms of iron were formed.

For three months the Xeelee ship patrolled the length of its creation; it passed its beautiful wings through the star-core cylinder, filtering out the heavy elements.

During this period Erwal tried once to activate her panel-windows. They filled with a red glow over which lay a brilliant white line. She studied the new scene for some time, frowning; but it meant nothing to her, and at length she turned the window off, wondering if the device was malfunctioning somehow.

At last the Xeelee ship was ready to construct an Earth.

The heart of it was a core of iron seven thousand miles wide, set spinning between the superstars. Leaving the core at stellar-surface temperatures, the ship now laid down a mantle of silicate rocks, constructed from the mineral banks it had built up in the core of the superstar, and overlaid the whole with a thin crust of oxygen and silicon. Next, compressing billions of years of planetary evolution into weeks, it deposited lodes of iron, bronze, tin, methane at suitably accessible points. There was even uranium. Then riverbeds, ocean floors, fjords were gouged out by the flickering of a cherry-red beam.

The process was creative; the ship almost enjoyed it.

After six months the bones of the planet were laid down. The ship landed at various points on the surface and, by firing refrigerating particle beams into the sky, rapidly cooled the crust through thousands of degrees.

Next, ice asteroids were smashed into the bare surface, as were lodes of frozen oxygen and nitrogen. The ice melted and flowed into the waiting sea beds; gases hissed into a cloak about the planet.

All this took two more months; but at last the ship's nightdark wings cruised over clear oceans, through crisp blue oxygen.

The first clouds formed. Rain fell.

Next it was time to establish an ecosystem.

The ship had never visited Earth, or even the interior of the box-world its Xeelee designers had built for the humans. But it knew the general principles.

The ship's clay was the genetic material of its human occupants, and their various parasites and symbionts. Tiny laboratories embedded in the ship's hull laboured for many days.

The first priority was an oxygenating flora. The ship chose melanin, the tanning agent stored in the humans' melanocyte cells, to serve as the basis for a photosynthetic process. That, combined with extrapolations of the humans' intestinal flora -

Rainforests exploded across the new continents, oceans of banyan-like trees force-grown by the ship. And a kind of plankton spread like a brown stain through the seas.

Animals to populate the land and seas; to serve as food for the people? Human genetic material, the

ship found, was a remarkably flexible substance; the adjustment of a mere few per cent of the DNA strands gave astonishing scope for design.

This was another creative phase. The ship lingered over it, taking perhaps six months.

At last the various feedback cycles were established; the ecosystem, powered by sunlight, was established and self-sustaining.

The ship hovered over its creation, considering.

The world's sun, a superstar, was scarcely Sol-like, of course; light-days away, it blazed down, hot and red, over its unlikely new satellite. The superstar would last mere millions of years, but the ship decided that that should be enough time for the humans to work out what to do next for themselves.

The wings of the Xeelee ship curved one last time over the new world.

It was done. It was good.

Without ceremony the ship settled to the ground, threw open its ports, and deactivated.

Erwal arose from sleep, aroused by the soft scent of grass. She rose stiffly, rubbed the sleep from her eyes, and made her way over sleeping bodies past the open port to the control table -

The open port?

She turned back carefully. Was this another vision, a Friend-induced illusion?

This port had not opened for a year and a half... Now it led to a gentle ramp. The ramp lay in sunlight, and it nestled against soft earth.

The Friend was gone forever. Whatever this was, it was real.

Trembling, Erwal walked down the ramp and into sunlight which warmed her neck. She paused at the ramp's edge, uncertain. Then, deliberately, she pressed her bare feet into the ground. The grass was cool and a little damp, as if dew-sprinkled - and it was a deep, dark brown. A breeze, strange on her skin after months of ship's air, brought goosebumps to her bare arms.

She was standing on a grass-covered slope. The sun above was a pinkish red; it brought out rich autumnal tones in the grass's dominant brown. The ship was a slim black cylinder, its wings folded away; it rested on the grass, incongruous. The slope fell away to a river which slid, gurgling, between tree-lined banks. The leaves of the trees were brown too, a pale russet colour; but they flickered convincingly in the breeze. (What was that she saw in the branches of the trees? - The little creature, about a foot long, returned her gaze with startlingly human eyes, and scurried out of sight to the top of the tree.) She looked along the river. As far upstream as she could see there were no ice-floes. In the distance grey mountains shouldered above the plain; snow touched their peaks. And downstream of the river she made out a line of light, right on the horizon. A sea?

Something came flickering through the sky, out of the sun: a bird, no larger than her fist, scooting over the grass at about head-height. She reached up

towards it, impulsively; the bird swivelled its tiny (human!) head towards her, opened its mouth in fright, revealing rows of jewel-like teeth, and veered away, rustling into the distance.

Sura came climbing up from the river. She was singing quietly. When she saw Erwal she smiled, her nose and forehead pink. "Erwal, where are we?"

Erwal laughed. "Wherever it is, it seems... agreeable."

Now more villagers came stumbling from the ship, open-mouthed; they seemed to expand as they sucked in the rich air. The children instantly ran off down the slope.

Erwal turned back to Sura. "What do you think we should do?"

The girl shrugged. "Get some teepees built, I suppose. Before the snows come."

Erwal nodded. "But maybe the snows won't be so bad here."

"No. Maybe not."

Arm in arm the two women walked down to the river.

Time passed.

After a certain point measurement of time became meaningless. For Paul this point

arrived when there was no hydrogen left to burn anywhere, and the last star flickered and died.

Already the universe was a hundred times its age when the Xeelee left.

Sombrely Paul watched the dimmed galaxies subside like the chests of old men. At last there was little free baryonic matter outside the resultant vast black holes. Then, as the long night of the cosmos deepened, even protons collapsed, and the remaining star-corpses began to evaporate.

Paul wearied of puzzling over the huge, slow projects of the Engineers. He sought out what had once been a neutron star. The carbon-coated sphere floating between the huge black holes was so dense that proton decay was actually warming it, keeping it a few degrees above the near-absolute zero of its surroundings; Paul, as if seeking comfort, clustered his attention foci close to this shadow of baryonic glory.

After some time he became aware that he was not alone: the last of the Qax had come sliding through the interstices of space and now hovered with him over the chill surface of the star.

Human and Qax, huddled around the proton star, did not attempt to communicate. There was nothing more to say.

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Index to *Interzone*, Issues 1-50

The following index is arranged in alphabetical order, by author and subject-author. It does not include book and film reviews, but it does include all comment articles, interviews and "Big Sellers" features. Each item is coded as follows: "C" = comment or criticism; "F" = fiction; "I" = interview; "P" = pictorial feature; "V" = verse.

| | | | |
|---|----------------------|---|----------------------|
| Abrera, Julio Buck (F) <i>Salvage</i> | #24 Summer 88 p46 | Brooke, Keith (F) <i>Adrenotropic Man</i> | #30 Jul/Aug 89 p29 |
| Acker, Kathy (I) Interview by Stan Nicholls | #27 Jan/Feb 89 p36 | _____ (F) <i>The Greatest Game of All</i> | #34 Mar/Apr 90 p22 |
| Adams, Douglas (C) <i>The Big Sellers - Douglas Adams</i> | #30 Jul/Aug 89 p18 | _____ (F) <i>The Mother</i> | #37 Jul 90 p40 |
| Aldiss, Brian (F) <i>The Gods in Flight</i> | #9 Autumn 84 p10 | _____ (F) <i>Beefcake</i> | #39 Sep 90 p5 |
| _____ (F) <i>A Life of Matter and Death</i> | #38 Aug 90 p5 | Brosnan, John (F) <i>The One and Only Tale from The White Horse</i> | #15 Spring 86 p15 |
| _____ (I) Interview by Colin Greenland | #38 Aug 90 p15 | _____ (F) <i>An Eye in Paradise</i> | #27 Jan/Feb 89 p39 |
| _____ (F) <i>Dracula Unbound</i> | #38 Aug 90 p19 | Brown, Eric (F) <i>Krash-Bang Joe and the Pineal-Zen Equation</i> | #21 Autumn 87 p4 |
| _____ (C) <i>Bury My Heart at W.H. Smith's</i> | #38 Aug 90 p29 | _____ (F) <i>The Girl Who Died for Art, and Lived</i> | #22 Winter 87/88 p51 |
| Allan, Nicholas (F) <i>Cheek to Cheek</i> | #3 Autumn 82 p23 | _____ (F) <i>The Time-Lapsed Man</i> | #24 Summer 88 p20 |
| Amsden, Alethea (F) <i>Fugitives from the Watch Ward</i> | #44 Feb 91 p44 | _____ (F) <i>Big Trouble Upstairs</i> | #26 Nov/Dec 88 p35 |
| Aramaki, Yoshio (F) <i>Soft Clocks</i> | #27 Jan/Feb 89 p46 | _____ (F) <i>Star-Crystals and Karmel</i> | #31 Sep/Oct 89 p5 |
| Ballard, J.G. (F) <i>Memories of the Space Age</i> | #2 Summer 82 p3 | _____ (F) <i>The Pharaean Efec</i> | #41 Nov 90 p12 |
| _____ (V) <i>What I Believe</i> | #8 Summer 84 p37 | _____ (F) <i>Piloting</i> | #44 Feb 91 p6 |
| _____ (F) <i>The Object of the Attack</i> | #9 Autumn 84 p4 | _____ (F) <i>The Nilakantha Scream</i> | #48 Jun 91 p32 |
| _____ (F) <i>The Man Who Walked on the Moon</i> | #13 Autumn 85 p3 | Burns, Christopher (F) <i>John's Return to Liverpool</i> | #10 Winter 84/85 p4 |
| _____ (I) Interview by David Pringle | #22 Winter 87/88 p13 | _____ (F) <i>Fogged Plates</i> | #11 Spring 85 p19 |
| _____ (C) <i>My "Ten Best" SF Movies</i> | #27 Jan/Feb 89 p25 | _____ (F) <i>Among the Wounded</i> | #22 Winter 87/88 p41 |
| _____ (F) <i>The Enormous Space</i> | #30 Jul/Aug 89 p12 | _____ (F) <i>Babel</i> | #25 Sep/Oct 88 p21 |
| Banks, Iain M. (I) Interview by Kim Newman | #16 Summer 86 p41 | Burns, Jim (P) <i>Lightship</i> | #16 Summer 86 p9 |
| _____ (F) <i>A Gift from the Culture</i> | #20 Summer 87 p44 | Byrne, Eugene & Kim Newman (F) <i>In the Air</i> | #43 Jan 91 p6 |
| Barker, Clive (I) Interview by Kim Newman | #14 Winter 85/86 p13 | _____ (F) <i>Ten Days That Shook the World</i> | #48 Jun 91 p48 |
| Barnes, Steven & Larry Niven (I) Interview by Stan Nicholls | #39 Sep 90 p19 | Byrne, Eugene, Kim Newman & Neil Gaiman (F) <i>Culprits</i> | #40 Oct 90 p59 |
| Barrett, David V. (C) <i>Workshops and Writing</i> | #44 Feb 91 p61 | Calder, Richard (F) <i>Mosquito</i> | #32 Nov/Dec 89 p5 |
| Baxter, Stephen (F) <i>The Xeelee Flower</i> | #19 Spring 87 p47 | _____ (F) <i>The Lilim</i> | #34 Mar/Apr 90 p5 |
| _____ (F) <i>Something for Nothing</i> | #23 Spring 88 p43 | _____ (F) <i>The Allure</i> | #40 Oct 90 p36 |
| _____ (F) <i>The Jonah Man</i> | #28 Mar/Apr 89 p5 | Campbell, Ramsey (F) <i>Boiled Alive</i> | #18 Winter 86/87 p26 |
| _____ (F) <i>Raft</i> | #31 Sep/Oct 89 p27 | _____ (I) Interview by Philip Vine | #28 Mar/Apr 89 p11 |
| _____ (F) <i>Vacuum Diagrams</i> | #35 May 90 p5 | _____ (F) <i>Meeting the Author</i> | #28 Mar/Apr 89 p17 |
| _____ (F) <i>Traces</i> | #45 Mar 91 p38 | Carroll, Jonathan (F) <i>The Panic Hand</i> | #33 Jan/Feb 90 p28 |
| _____ (F) <i>The Baryonic Lords, Part One</i> | #49 Jul 91 p6 | Carter, Angela (F) <i>The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe</i> | #1 Spring 82 p14 |
| _____ (I) Interview by Colin Munro | #50 Aug 91 p42 | _____ (F) <i>Overture for "A Midsummer Night's Dream"</i> | #3 Autumn 82 p10 |
| _____ (F) <i>The Baryonic Lords, Part Two</i> | #50 Aug 91 p43 | Cherryh, C.J. (I) Interview by Stan Nicholls | #31 Sep/Oct 89 p24 |
| Bayley, Barrington J. (F) <i>The Ur-Plant</i> | #4 Spring 83 p26 | Christopher, John (F) <i>A Journey South</i> | #44 Feb 91 p22 |
| _____ (F) <i>Escapist Literature</i> | #13 Autumn 85 p25 | Clarkson, M. Alan & Gary Mitchell (F) <i>Like a Filthiss from its Shell</i> | #47 May 91 p13 |
| _____ (F) <i>Tommy Atkins</i> | #27 Jan/Feb 89 p5 | Clute, John (C) <i>The Big Sellers - Terry Pratchett</i> | #23 Mar/Feb 90 p24 |
| _____ (F) <i>The Death of Ariett</i> | #32 Nov/Dec 89 p22 | Coldsmith, Sherry (F) <i>Faking It</i> | #42 Dec 90 p27 |
| _____ (F) <i>Culture Shock</i> | #35 May 90 p12 | Coney, Michael (I) Interview by David V. Barrett | #32 Nov/Dec 89 p40 |
| _____ (I) Interview by Robertson and Pringle | #35 May 90 p17 | Cowper, Richard (F) <i>The Tithonian Factor</i> | #5 Autumn 83 p8 |
| Bear, Greg (F) <i>Heads, Part One</i> | #37 Jul 90 p5 | Crowley, John (F) <i>Novelty</i> | #5 Autumn 83 p18 |
| _____ (I) Interview by Gregory Feeley | #37 Jul 90 p25 | _____ (I) Interview by Gregory Feeley | #21 Autumn 87 p15 |
| _____ (F) <i>Heads, Part Two</i> | #38 Aug 90 p47 | Dean, Roger & Colin Greenland (P) <i>Radical Architecture</i> | #6 Winter 83/84 p20 |
| Beckett, Chris (F) <i>A Matter of Survival</i> | #40 Oct 90 p51 | Dick, Philip K. (F) <i>Strange Memories of Death</i> | #8 Summer 84 p21 |
| _____ (F) <i>La Macchina</i> | #46 Apr 91 p19 | Dickens, Matthew (F) <i>Great Chain of Being</i> | #34 Mar/Apr 90 p55 |
| _____ (F) <i>The Long Journey of Frozen Heart</i> | #49 Jul 91 p56 | Disch, Thomas M. (V) <i>Cantata '82</i> | #2 Summer 82 p29 |
| Beetlestone, Susan (F) <i>Face Lift</i> | #26 Nov/Dec 88 p21 | _____ (F) <i>Canned Goods</i> | #9 Autumn 84 p17 |
| _____ (F) <i>An Artificial Life</i> | #34 Mar/Apr 90 p17 | _____ (F) <i>Hard Work</i> | #17 Autumn 86 p28 |
| _____ (F) <i>Heart of Santa Rosa</i> | #38 Aug 90 p39 | _____ (I) Interview by Gregory Feeley | #24 Summer 88 p17 |
| Benford, Gregory (F) <i>Freeze-frame</i> | #17 Autumn 86 p4 | _____ (C) <i>The Village Alien</i> | #25 Sep/Oct 88 p25 |
| _____ (F) <i>As Big as the Ritz</i> | #18 Winter 86/87 p4 | _____ (C) <i>Primal Hooting</i> | #29 May/Jun 89 p44 |
| Bishop, Michael (F) <i>The Bob Dylan Tambourine Software & Satori Support Services Consortium Ltd</i> | #12 Summer 85 p5 | _____ (F) <i>Celebrity Love</i> | #35 May 90 p21 |
| Bisson, Terry (I) Interview by Gregory Feeley | #40 Oct 90 p42 | Donaldson, Stephen (C) <i>The Big Sellers - Stephen Donaldson</i> | #32 Nov/Dec 89 p18 |
| Black, Johnny (F) <i>The Agony of Suburban Knowledge</i> | #26 Nov/Dec 88 p42 | Dorff, Edward & Colin Greenland (P) <i>Vitamin Memories</i> | #5 Autumn 83 p16 |
| Blumlein, Michael (F) <i>Tissue Ablation and Variant Regeneration: A Case Report</i> | #7 Spring 84 p28 | Edwards, Malcolm (F) <i>After-Images</i> | #4 Spring 83 p16 |
| _____ (F) <i>The Brains of Rats</i> | #16 Summer 86 p24 | Egan, Greg (F) <i>Mind Vampires</i> | #18 Winter 86/87 p45 |
| Bradbury, Ray (I) Interview by Stan Nicholls | #43 Jan 91 p31 | _____ (F) <i>Scatter My Ashes</i> | #23 Spring 88 p50 |
| Bradfield, Scott (F) <i>The Flash Kid</i> | #5 Autumn 83 p3 | _____ (F) <i>The Cutie</i> | #29 May/Jun 89 p5 |
| _____ (F) <i>Unmistakably the Finest</i> | #8 Summer 84 p4 | _____ (F) <i>Eugene</i> | #36 Jun 90 p20 |
| _____ (F) <i>The Dream of the Wolf</i> | #10 Winter 84/85 p34 | _____ (F) <i>Learning to Be Me</i> | #37 Jul 90 p53 |
| Bradley, Marion Zimmer (C) <i>The Big Sellers - Marion Zimmer Bradley</i> | #42 Dec 90 p34 | _____ (F) <i>Axiomatic</i> | #41 Nov 90 p32 |
| _____ (C) <i>The Big Sellers - Anne McCaffrey</i> | #34 Mar/Apr 90 p27 | _____ (F) <i>Blood Sisters</i> | #44 Feb 91 p52 |
| _____ (C) <i>The Big Sellers - Marion Zimmer Bradley</i> | #42 Dec 90 p34 | _____ (F) <i>The Infinite Assassin</i> | #48 Jun 91 p6 |
| Brin, David (F) <i>The Giving Plague</i> | #23 Spring 88 p5 | _____ (F) <i>Appropriate Love</i> | #50 Aug 91 p6 |
| _____ (F) <i>Piecework</i> | #33 Jan/Feb 90 p5 | Ellison, Harlan (F) <i>Darkness Upon the Face of the Deep</i> | #47 May 91 p44 |
| _____ (I) Interview by Stan Nicholls | #41 Nov 90 p21 | Evans, Christopher (F) <i>Artefacts</i> | #23 Spring 88 p24 |
| | | Falconer, Stuart (F) <i>Familars</i> | #33 Jan/Feb 90 p51 |
| | | Feist, Raymond E. (C) <i>The Big Sellers - Raymond E. Feist</i> | #39 Sep 90 p31 |

| | | | |
|---|----------------------|---|----------------------|
| Ferguson, Andrew (F) Green-Eyed Monstera..... | #29 May/Jun 89 p47 | Laidlaw, Marc & Rudy Rucker (F) Chaos Surfari..... | #28 Mar/Apr 89 p48 |
| Ferguson, Neil (F) The Monroe Doctrine..... | #6 Winter 83/84 p11 | Lake, Christina (F) Assyria..... | #19 Spring 87 p35 |
| (F) Randy and Alexei Go Jaw Jaw..... | #13 Autumn 85 p35 | Landis, Geoffrey A. (F) Jamals Vu..... | #45 Mar 91 p43 |
| (F) The Second Third of C..... | #19 Spring 87 p5 | Langford, David (F) Cube Root..... | #11 Spring 85 p13 |
| (F) One-Way to Wap Wap..... | #35 May 90 p34 | (F) Blit..... | #25 Sep/Oct 88 p40 |
| Fitzgerald, M. J. (F) Experiment with Time..... | #8 Summer 84 p26 | (C) Best Foot Forward..... | #35 May 90 p48 |
| Fowler, Karen Joy (I) Interview by Paul Kincaid..... | #23 Spring 88 p21 | (C) Despatches from the UFO Wars..... | #40 Oct 90 p34 |
| (F) Heartland..... | #24 Summer 88 p15 | (F) A Snapshot Album..... | #43 Jan 91 p35 |
| (F) Game Night at the Fox and Goose..... | #29 May/Jun 89 p11 | Le Guin, Ursula (I) Interview by Colin Greenland..... | #45 Mar 91 p58 |
| (F) Sarah Canary and the Mermaid..... | #42 Dec 90 p20 | Lee, Ian (F) Driving Through Korea..... | #27 Jan/Feb 89 p29 |
| Gaiman, Neil, Kim Newman & Eugene Byrne (F) Culprits..... | #40 Oct 90 p59 | (F) Once Upon a Time in the Park..... | #30 Jul/Aug 89 p5 |
| Gallagher, Stephen (I) Interview by David V. Barrett..... | #31 Sep/Oct 89 p47 | (F) A Lot of Mackerel, A Lot of Satellites..... | #37 Jul 90 p29 |
| Garnett, David (F) Saving the Universe..... | #3 Autumn 82 p27 | (F) Pigs, Mostly..... | #50 Aug 91 p34 |
| (F) The Only One..... | #22 Winter 87/88 p4 | Lucas, Allen A. (C) Goodbye - and Thanks for the SF..... | #15 Spring 86 p35 |
| (F) Now Read On..... | #39 Sep 90 p60 | Lyon, Pete (P) Rain, Tunnel and Bombfire..... | #11 Spring 85 p24 |
| Garratt, Peter T. (F) If the Driver Vanishes..... | #13 Autumn 85 p19 | MacLeod, Ian R. (F) Through..... | #30 Jul/Aug 89 p51 |
| (F) Our Lady of Springtime..... | #25 Sep/Oct 88 p30 | (F) Well-Loved..... | #34 Mar/Apr 90 p13 |
| Gemmell, David (C) The Big Sellers - David Gemmell..... | #36 Jun 90 p36 | (F) Past Magic..... | #39 Sep 90 p23 |
| Gentle, Mary (I) Interview by Colin Greenland..... | #42 Dec 90 p49 | Mann, Phillip (F) Lux in Tenebris..... | #24 Summer 88 p35 |
| Gibson, William (F) Fragments of a Hologram Rose..... | #9 Autumn 84 p33 | (F) An Old-Fashioned Story..... | #29 May/Jun 89 p21 |
| (I) Interview by Nicholas and Hanna..... | #13 Autumn 85 p17 | Mapes, Diane (F) Shallow Grave..... | #46 Apr 91 p42 |
| (F) The Winter Market..... | #15 Spring 86 p3 | (F) Remnants..... | #50 Aug 91 p14 |
| Gibson, William & Bruce Sterling (F) The Angel of Goliad..... | #40 Oct 90 p6 | McAuley, Paul J. (F) Little Ilya and Spider and Box..... | #12 Summer 85 p13 |
| Gilman, Carolyn Ives (F) Glass Angel..... | #42 Dec 90 p38 | (F) The King of the Hill..... | #14 Winter 85/86 p30 |
| Goldstein, Lisa (F) City of Peace..... | #30 Jul/Aug 89 p23 | (F) A Dragon for Seyour Chan..... | #19 Spring 87 p16 |
| (I) Interview by Pat Murphy..... | #42 Dec 90 p18 | (F) Karl and the Ogre..... | #23 Spring 88 p13 |
| Grant, Glenn (F) Memetic Drift..... | #34 Mar/Apr 90 p42 | (F) Exiles..... | #41 Nov 90 p45 |
| (F) Suburban Industrial..... | #41 Nov 90 p63 | (F) Crossroads..... | #46 Apr 91 p6 |
| (F) Storm Surge..... | #46 Apr 91 p29 | (F) Gene Wars..... | #48 Jun 91 p15 |
| Greenland, Colin & Edward Dorr (P) Vitamin Memories..... | #5 Autumn 83 p16 | McCaffrey, Anne (C) The Big Sellers - Anne McCaffrey..... | #34 Mar/Apr 90 p27 |
| Greenland, Colin & Roger Dean (P) Radical Architecture..... | #6 Winter 83/84 p20 | McCarthy, Wil (F) Amerikano Hiaika..... | #47 May 91 p18 |
| Gribbin, John (F) Other Edens..... | #31 Sep/Oct 89 p45 | McDonald, Ian (F) Listen..... | #32 Nov/Dec 89 p49 |
| (F) Don't Look Back..... | #40 Oct 90 p45 | Miller, Ian (P) The Angle of Consciousness..... | #21 Autumn 87 p22 |
| (F) Something to Beef About..... | #49 Jul 91 p36 | Mitchell, Gary & M. Alan Clarkson (F) Like a Filthiss from its Shell..... | #47 May 91 p13 |
| Griffith, Nicola (F) Mirrors and Burnstone..... | #25 Sep/Oct 88 p45 | Montgomery, Lee (F) Green Hearts..... | #10 Winter 84/85 p9 |
| (F) Down the Path of the Sun..... | #34 Mar/Apr 90 p50 | (F) War and/or Peace..... | #11 Spring 85 p5 |
| (F) Song of Bullfrogs, Cry of Geese..... | #48 Jun 91 p42 | (F) The New Jerusalem PLC..... | #32 Nov/Dec 89 p33 |
| (F) Wearing My Skin..... | #50 Aug 91 p20 | (C) The Big Sellers - L. Ron Hubbard..... | #35 May 90 p31 |
| Grunwell, Paul M. (F) Relocation..... | #46 Apr 91 p39 | Moorcock, Michael (F) The Brothel in Rosenstrasse..... | #1 Spring 82 p24 |
| Haldeman, Joe (I) Interview by Stan Nicholls..... | #44 Feb 91 p39 | (I) Interview by Colin Greenland..... | #29 May/Jun 89 p17 |
| Hall, Sharon M. (F) The Last Game..... | #33 Jan/Feb 90 p35 | (F) Eric: A Dragon Wakes..... | #46 Apr 91 p50 |
| Hand, Elizabeth (F) The Bacchae..... | #49 Jul 91 p29 | Morrow, James (I) Interview by Gregory Feeley..... | #48 Apr 91 p24 |
| Harrison, M. John (F) The New Rays..... | #1 Spring 82 p3 | Murphy, Pat (F) His Vegetable Wife..... | #16 Summer 86 p33 |
| (F) Strange Great Sins..... | #5 Autumn 83 p31 | (F) The Eradication of Romantic Love..... | #42 Dec 90 p13 |
| (F) The Luck in the Head..... | #9 Autumn 84 p23 | (I) Interview by Lisa Goldstein..... | #42 Dec 90 p16 |
| (F) A Young Man's Journey to Viriconium..... | #12 Summer 85 p29 | Nasir, Jamil (F) Not Even Ashes..... | #31 Sep/Oct 89 p51 |
| (I) Interview by Paul Kincaid..... | #18 Winter 86/87 p31 | Nesvadba, Josef (F) The Storeroom of Lost Desire..... | #30 Jul/Aug 89 p36 |
| Haynes, D.C. (F) Soundspinner..... | #17 Autumn 86 p21 | Newman, Kim (F) Dreamers..... | #8 Summer 84 p16 |
| Hendry, John (F) The Views of Mohammed el Hassif..... | #6 Winter 83/84 p18 | (F) Patricia's Profession..... | #14 Winter 85/86 p25 |
| Hills, Barbara (F) Future Fish..... | #17 Autumn 86 p41 | (F) The Next-But-One Man..... | #19 Spring 87 p25 |
| Holdstock, Robert (F) The Bone Forest..... | #45 Mar 91 p6 | (F) Famous Monsters..... | #23 Spring 88 p38 |
| (I) Interview by Stan Nicholls..... | #45 Mar 91 p34 | (F) Twitch Technicolor..... | #28 Mar/Apr 89 p23 |
| Hood, Martha A. (F) Learning the Language..... | #42 Dec 90 p43 | (F) Gargantuabots vs the Nice Mice..... | #33 Jan/Feb 90 p17 |
| Hopwood, Lyle (F) The Outside Door..... | #28 Mar/Apr 89 p30 | (F) The Original Dr Shade..... | #36 Jun 90 p5 |
| Hubbard, L. Ron (C) The Big Sellers - L. Ron Hubbard..... | #35 May 90 p31 | (I) Interview by Roz Kaveney..... | #36 Jun 90 p17 |
| Ings, Simon D. (F) The Braining of Mother Lamprey..... | #36 Jun 90 p48 | Newman, Kim & Eugene Byrne (F) In the Air..... | #43 Jan 91 p6 |
| (C) Cabarets and Talking Heads..... | #45 Mar 91 p48 | (F) Ten Days That Shook the World..... | #48 Jun 91 p48 |
| (C) Amazingly Extended Metaphors..... | #49 Jul 91 p48 | Newman, Kim, Neil Gaiman & Eugene Byrne (F) Culprits..... | #40 Oct 90 p59 |
| Jeapes, Ben (F) Memoirs of a Publisher..... | #43 Jan 91 p40 | Nicholls, Stan (C) The Big Sellers - David Gemmell..... | #36 Jun 90 p36 |
| Jeter, K.W. (I) Interview by Les Escott..... | #22 Winter 87/88 p29 | (I) The SF Book Editors, part 1..... | #41 Nov 90 p40 |
| Jones, Chris (P) The Electric Zoo..... | #8 Summer 84 p14 | (I) The SF Book Editors, part 2..... | #43 Jan 91 p51 |
| Jones, Gwyneth (C) Sex Change Operation Shock..... | #16 Summer 86 p23 | Niven, Larry & Steven Barnes (I) Interview by Stan Nicholls..... | #39 Sep 90 p19 |
| (I) Interview by Paul Kincaid..... | #19 Spring 87 p13 | Omniaveritas, Vincent (C) The New Science Fiction..... | #14 Winter 85/86 p39 |
| (F) Gravegoods..... | #31 Sep/Oct 89 p15 | Ounsley, Simon (F) Adam Found..... | #17 Autumn 86 p44 |
| (F) Forward Echoes..... | #42 Dec 90 p52 | (F) Paths of Dying..... | #18 Winter 86/87 p33 |
| Jones, Neil (F) Hands..... | #43 Jan 91 p57 | Parkin, George (P) Laser Smith's Space Academy..... | #12 Summer 85 p26 |
| (F) Heads or Tails..... | #45 Mar 91 p62 | Platt, Charles (C) Alfred Bester, 1913-1987..... | #23 Spring 88 p48 |
| Kadrey, Richard (P) Synaptic Intrigue (Collages)..... | #9 Autumn 84 p20 | (C) Destination: Gloom..... | #24 Summer 88 p44 |
| (F) The Fire Catcher..... | #12 Summer 85 p22 | (C) Two Kinds of Censorship..... | #25 Sep/Oct 88 p43 |
| (F) Goodbye Houston Street, Goodbye..... | #19 Spring 87 p42 | (C) The War Bores..... | #26 Nov/Dec 88 p45 |
| Kaveney, Roz (C) In Celebration of Brian Aldiss..... | #38 Aug 90 p25 | (C) The Triumph of Whimsy..... | #27 Jan/Feb 89 p44 |
| Kennedy, Leigh (I) Interview by Paul Kincaid..... | #26 Nov/Dec 88 p18 | (C) Taking Liberties..... | #28 Mar/Apr 89 p46 |
| Kilworth, Garry (F) The Dissemblers..... | #3 Autumn 82 p3 | (C) The Vanishing Midlist..... | #29 May/Jun 89 p49 |
| (F) Spiral Winds..... | #9 Autumn 84 p37 | (C) In Purely Commercial Terms..... | #30 Jul/Aug 89 p49 |
| (F) The Vivarium..... | #15 Spring 86 p19 | (C) Homage to Narcissism..... | #31 Sep/Oct 89 p43 |
| (F) Dop*elgan*er..... | #21 Autumn 87 p17 | (C) Popular Literature?..... | #32 Nov/Dec 89 p47 |
| (F) The Men's Room..... | #29 May/Jun 89 p38 | (C) Report from Utopia..... | #33 Jan/Feb 90 p49 |
| (F) Hamelin, Nebraska..... | #48 Jun 91 p22 | (C) Participative Fiction..... | #34 Mar/Apr 90 p39 |
| King, William (F) Visiting the Dead..... | #28 Mar/Apr 89 p40 | | |

No Wonder

John Clute

Three years ago, it was possible to think of Paul J. McAuley as a writer too smart for the boots he wore. The brand of boot that chafed him happened to be space opera, and the book that he was too smart to write without chafing the genre it aped was *Four Hundred Billion Stars* (1988). Paul J. McAuley, I said in *Interzone* 28, significantly failed in this book to embrace an assumption shared by many of his American colleagues — the sense that the heroes of space opera were talking heads of the Word, that they bore our frank blessings and our gifts of entitlement as they took the universe to sup, and that the sense of wonder we felt was somehow delivered by them to us (rather than vice versa). Screw that for a lark, said Paul J. McAuley. I'm out of here.

And he left.

But maybe we should spend a moment or two on the sense of wonder, as it was of old, before trying to assess whether or not he has managed, in his new novel, to do good God talk in a sufficiently different voice. Traditionally, the sense of wonder is supposed to flood through a reader's sensorium when the space opera text he's reading confronts him — through an unexpected shift in perspective — with the Sublime, a term which might in this case be defined as awe at the instigation of vastness. Because space opera — a term I use indiscriminately to cover all sorts of interstellar epics, quest tales amongst the stars, first contact stories, cosmogony operas, and so forth — is itself traditionally thought to be a mode for dealing with the new, the unexpected, the thought variant unperceived by Man, the sense of wonder it evokes is expected to *surprise* the reader; and indeed surprise — an unprecedented opening of the eyes — has been thought essential to the understanding of space opera wonder.

That this is an extremely peculiar belief might seem evident enough to most of us; it is, however, a belief almost certainly shared by Alexei and Cory Panshin, the Whig goons of modern sf scholarship whose history of sf, *The World Beyond the Hill* (Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc., \$16.95 pb, 1989), makes it darned clear that in

1930 American space opera — unbelievers must read the book, because I'm not exaggerating — took over the burden of understanding the twentieth century from the likes of H.G. Wells and Olaf Stapledon and other European cowards who "lacked the depth of vision and the sheer power of imagination necessary to alter their altitudes":

What? Take one's chances with the unknown? That was a very difficult proposition to entertain. The scientific universe was so very large and dark and intimidating. Who in all the world was prepared to imagine taking his chances with that?

Well — not H.G. Wells, for one. Only certain writers — according to the Panshins they were E.E. Smith, Edmond Hamilton, Jack Williamson, Stanley Weinbaum and John W. Campbell, Jr. — had "the courage and insight necessary to take the bad news that had been delivered by science [that of Man's peripheralization in the universe], face it squarely, and transmute it into something positive." By inventing space opera, these writers entered a totally new universe whose wise profligacy put to shame Wells's "Village"-bound insistence, circa 1933, that "anyone can invent human beings inside out or worlds like dumbbells or gravitation that repels," that "nothing remains interesting where anything can happen." Nonsense, say the Panshins. "It is only by the multitude of wonders encountered that we can ever know that we have entered a realm of transcendence."

But no "Thought Experiment" in pretending to believe any of this bunkum can get away with treating it in the abstract. We have to come to terms with the actual texts in which the multitude of wonders are unveiled. We have to manage to pretend to believe, for instance, that Richard Seaton, the social-climbing school bully who fronts E.E. Smith's *The Skylark of Space* (1928 in *Amazing*), is the hero Edgar Allan Poe dared not dream of, the hero H.G. Wells flinched from describing, the hero not one of the culture-cowards who infested post-War Europe dared un-

leash upon a galaxy full of alien races which invariably lacked that inextinguishable sang-froid which John W. Campbell would later declare defined homo sapiens and no story which does not recognize this fact will ever gain admission to the pages of *Astounding* (and none did); we have then to pretend to believe that Seaton somehow forges his way into something like a real universe out there — carrying along with him, not incidentally, that valiant Yankee band of brothers and tomboys *brave enough to read tru-f* — and that the wonders felt put paid to Stapledonian pessimism; the task is to believe that the sense of wonder which E.E. Smith bestows upon us could be defined as some sort of attar of the conquered new, and not a salve and complacency for wounded children.

I am now privileged to reveal, for the first time in print, a secret about the sense of wonder. It is *not dangerous to humans*. It does not peel the eye open to the new. It does not bring us gifts Olaf Stapledon dared not limn. If we come across a book in which the effect is felt, or if — much the same thing — we happen to return to a book in which we know we'll find it again, what we feel is no dis-ease of awe at the Sublime, no spotlight from the future hauling us in, but simply a resolution of tension. The reason for this is simple: in traditional sf the sense of wonder is nothing more, or less, than a form of dramatic irony, and is experienced when the stress of sustaining the gap upon which dramatic irony depends is resolved. As a device for giving dynamic tension to *what is known*, dramatic irony can be defined as that state of a text in which both author and reader know something the hero does not (if he's Richard Seaton, what he does not know is that the universe and his curriculum vitae are isomorphic); as they are superior to the hero by perspective, and anterior to him in knowledge, the author and the reader are safe from any threat he might make to discover anything previously unanticipated (it is for this reason that the sense of wonder only grows with rereading). Dramatic irony is the central device and perspective through which the agenbite of 20th-century meta-literature shows its symptomatic face, from the winter satires of Thomas Mann in the death-throes of Europe down to the recursive solipsisms of Robert A. Heinlein stewing his own juice; from the embittered mirror-dancing of all our fabulists down to the snug hugeness-pattern of E. E. Smith and all his progeny. And that is why the hero of space opera never utters a word of dissent

from the book that tells him: because the book *knows first* The only thing that *technically* distinguishes Thomas Mann from E.E. Smith is that Thomas Mann knows he's doing it. Space opera "knows" everything but itself. Safely "wondrous" — safely ironized — the hero of classic space opera waits upon us for sanction while pretending to lead the valiant band, and out of our generosity as owners of perspective we give him the Cargo of our cheap awe.

Paul J. McAuley could never bring himself to give Cargo. The heroine of *Four Hundred Billion Stars* (1 paraphrase *Interzone* 28) progresses through the book in a state of profound alienation from the energies that empower the establishments of the world. True to her generic origins in Wells and Stapledon, she maintains a hostile indifference to the masculine web that *operates* her, and to the dramatic irony of a plot which will — as we know from all we've ever read — soon shove her into galaxy-shaking BigThink epiphanies. As the book closes, the aliens she has communicated with are in worse shape than before, the military which has shanghaied her seems destined to continue a dead war, and she herself has been damaged — rather than Cargoed — by the revelations she's been telepathically privy to through a Talent which eats her brain when she turns it on. But in a sense she has triumphed. She has refused to suck Cargo from the book, and she has refused to be the object of our dramatic irony, which has made it impossible for us to feel a sense of wonder about any revelations she may be privy to. She is no solace to us.

In the new novel, *Eternal Light* (Gollancz, £14.99), which starts ten years later, she remains unreconciled. Like the heroine of *Alien* when *Aliens* begins, Dorthy is a walking wounded. By the end of the tale — 384 large pages later — she will no longer be wounded, she will have witnessed profound lessons in cosmogony, she will have given birth to a daughter whose powers, on time-honoured lines, much exceed her own; she will not have surrendered to the ironizing hegemony of genre wonder, even though her every move through the text has been haunted by clearly deliberate echoes of all the space operas McAuley has ever read.

Eternal Light is in fact an echo chamber of quotes. The first page echoes the first page of E.E. Smith's *Lensmen* series; on the last page, when Dorthy speaks of her daughter as "Poor little superwoman!", one of A.E. Van Vogt's better terminal lines

ghosts into view. In between, whole sequences parody Stanley Kubrick's *2001*, Cordwainer Smith's *Norstrilia* and so forth, tissuing the book with all the sounds of yore. It is hard to know where to stop the search for provenance: it may be enough, in general, to note that the book dresses in wrong-note genre hides like some Natty Bumppo stalking bison, and that hardly a page is free of the scent of cover. The most important pattern of quotation may be that which correlates the history and nature of the Alea — the aliens who also featured in *Four Hundred Billion Stars* — to the Known Space series of Larry Niven; and here it does seem that the relationship is more than one of protective colouring. Travelling backwards through time via wormholed planets may sound a *bit* like Greg Bear's *Eon*, but to introduce into one's text a batch of protectors — adults from a species whose attitude towards genetic drift is chilly — sounds a tad invasive. But this too is clearly deliberate. *Eternal Light* is a new book built on told dreams.

Patched into shards of story, these told dreams occupy much of the foreground of the book, blurring the several protagonists into a coat-of-many-colours melting pot of genre, though only till we become acquainted: at which point, like Dorthy, they turn into ringers in the opera: and dodge our condescensions, our bestowals of wonder upon the things they have been brought to see. It may be the case that the generic story bites which McAuley patches together take up an excessive number of pages, and that the several protagonists of his main story pay at times insufficient attention to the tropic lives they've led, or to the devices from the history of sf which guide them forward: that a large number of distractingly alternated chapters have been given over to a bunch of men and women who are *inattentive to the book* which is carrying them to the centre of the galaxy, where everything will be told. But that is the secret of the thing. *Eternal Light* is a mother bird: flapping its genre trappings like a fake broken wing to draw our ironies into the sand, while the true tale hatches unharmed.

After the noise dies down, that true tale turns out to be a fable of the creation and death of the universe, and of the husbanding of the music of the spheres, eloquently told, effortlessly huge in implication. It is a fable which could have been treated as old stuff in the wrong hands, and we could have been incessantly nudged by the text to remember to feel a sense of wonder about the comfy

thingness of the hugeness of the Big Bang and the attendant Arisian-clones who angel the passing show. But there is no sense of wonder in the book at all: no catering to the readership's need to own the numinous: no patent tendered to the Children of the Lens to soothe down transcendence's agenbite. A long denouement rein-serts Dorthy into the long nest of living, which she makes burgeon. Things continue to happen. There will almost certainly be a sequel, if Dorthy's appalling New Age daughter wasn't simply inserted into the text as another joke. But most important, through occasional mugginess of syntax and diction the wonder of things is more than once half-glimpsed, which is half more than we usually see. In the end, *Eternal Light* is about seeing the world. It is not a placebo. In the end, in its stubborn knowingness about the tricks it plays and in the final silence of the glimpse it gives, *Eternal Light* is a wonderful book.

Notes: Dennis Danvers's *Wilderness* (Simon & Schuster, £13.99) is perhaps the sweetest book yet written about its subject, designer werewolves. Sexy single Alice, werewolf once every month from puberty, falls in love with her tutor in Richmond, Virginia. He finds it difficult to believe she could *really* be a werewolf (and so does the author, whose representations of the psychicstress involved are fatally well-mannered: as though lycanthropy were a kind of neat cure for PMT) and they have a quarrel-cute after she tells him the truth, and she flees into the wilderness-cute to sort herself out, and he searches out her werewolf aunt, herself about to gafiate into the wilds, and apologizes-cute to the werewolf-cute and they lie on the ground together and the author leaves them just before they fuck (with practice). Extremely intelligent in parts, savvy about the behaviour of genuine wolves, *Wilderness* simply likes itself, and its protagonists, and even freeway-pretzeled Richmond, far too much come to grips with the hind-brain horrors of metamorphosis a-prowl within. It is a tail untold.

Many of the stories assembled in Brian Stableford's *Sexual Chemistry: Sardonic Tales of the Genetic Revolution* (Simon & Schuster, £13.99) were first published in *Interzone* over several years, so that it was not easy to detect the agenda revealed in the current subtitle, which is no misnomer. The book comprises through thematic linkage a series of explorations of genuine hypotheses; tales like this used to be called

Thought Experiments, but the strange archaic flavour of the writing derives directly from the shape of the telling.

Stableford has embedded his entirely contemporary (and often radical) speculations about human genetics into tales whose shape invokes memories of the Scientific Romance (his favoured form of sf at novel length, too). Each is a small biographical analysis of one or two people, usually men (he tends to edge into the naff in his dealing with women) whose speculative work in genetics has caused some sort of transformation; some other characters are anatomized as well. At first glance, the heart of each story lies in the analysis of transformation, usually of a complex order (only "The Engineer and the Executioner," revised from 1975, exits the task through generic shortcuts); but in fact each story is primarily about the human souls it exposes, and can be read as an exercise in assessing human outcomes. Each story begins in cliché — just as most lives, and most scientific careers, do — and each story violates our genre-trained sense of where the cliché must lead. There is a shrugging mercilessness about Stableford's bedside manner with a tale that is, at first, significantly chilling; it is only after one slides deep into the connective tissues of the worlds of this book that one begins to understand the humanity of his refusal to drop his conclusions down the gravity well of generic expectation. The real strength of the book lies in the wisdom of its portraits of human lives through time. Under the cold wit, and the cruel jokes, and the *conte cruel* ironies, there beats a heart of gold: so that the final effect of *Sexual Chemistry* is alchemical. It changes the mind.

...And Three to Fill the Bath with Brightly-Coloured Machine Parts Mary Gentle

For all the times that science fiction is supposed to unscrew reality for us, it so rarely does. Consolation is made more welcome than challenge. Challenges are uncomfortable wild beasts to keep about the house; they are paper consciences that mope in corners and remind us that we should be breaking the rules, we

should be watching the engagement of new perspectives, we should be feeling about sf as we felt at fourteen.

But most science fiction is dog literature. It looks up at us with trusting brown eyes, thumps a tail on the carpet, and broadcasts the consolatory message *Everything's all right, Master, I love you just as you already are*. More rarely there is cat literature, which claws you lightly at surprising intervals, but admits *You feed me, so for a while I'll permit you to have what you think you need*. Most rare and most rewarding, there are wolf books, which run in packs of their own irrespective of what we think we desire, and which, glimpsed by full moon, touch us to the heart with the sight of a freedom we once wanted.

Let us entice the beasts out of the corner, feed them hot soup and readers' attention, and see what we have.

My Lady Tongue and Other Tales (William Heinemann Australia, 1990, 280pp, pb, no cover price) is certainly a wolf. Lucy Sussex breaks the rules. The award-winning title story, "My Lady Tongue," is a dyke swashbuckler told in a tone with no rancorous edge to it, in a feminist utopia that isn't, but isn't dystopian either. There is an absence of justifiable grievance in it, a no-one-loses feeling, as if the story had dropped through from some alternate continuum where the race and gender wars are history. Raffish Raffy, in love with a woman whose hardcore separatist mother disapproves of her, recalls an unintentional walkabout rite of passage out in the antipodean country; and her encounter with a perfectly decent Benedict. Her Shakespearean sensibility defined in terms of this story admits all to her big heart, without in any way compromising her lusty self or her separatist woman's world. The impulse to cheer is irresistible.

And then there is "God and Her Black Sense of Humour," a humanitarian and all-embracing story which sends up the 60s, the rock press, feminism, vampires — and still contrives to be subtly unnerving, feminist, and a story that pushes back the borders of one's heart. It has a non right-on woman as winner; but one who will have no truck whatsoever with the right-off status quo. Sussex writes in a sinewy, generous prose which wastes no words, and from time to time hits on the exactly right one:

"Way back, I used to drink with some rock journalists, *Rolling Stone* staffers. They were an enviable lot, if you envy a lot of interviewing lunkhead hunks who played one-chord rock at a vol-

ume to stun mullets."

No story in this collection is quite like the others — from Shakespearean lesbian Romance to an AIDS patient and aboriginal paintings; from a secret delinquent society world-building a village from the name on a packet of tea, to a journalist's quest for the Plastercasters, those 60s groupies who collected — how shall I put it? — *concrete* souvenirs from their encounters. Here be death, and beaches, and vampires, and the out-back...

"The Lipton Village Society" breaks the rules of non-escapist fiction by allowing its protagonists their escape. "The Man Hanged Upside Down" is not afraid to tackle big, touchy issues like AIDS and neither tippy-toe around nor exploit them, but merely to say, unsensationally, *here it is*. Things are not destroyed, although they may die. "Quartet in Death Minor" features surreal psychology, still with a core of self-mocking humour; in "Montage" the protagonist makes discoveries about a technologically haunted beach, but takes refuge in too-fragile music; in "Red Ochre" the issue of animal rights is addressed in humane, generous, and playful manner.

I think I am trying to say that *My Lady Tongue and Other Tales* is not overawed by the subjects which liberals see as sacred and therefore to be approached with undue reverence. Older traditions know that from the *ludibrium* comes generosity of heart, and a fresh perspective on tense issues; or to put it another way, sometimes it is wise to fart in church and hear the congregation laugh. Laughter saves the soul.

What else should one know? *My Lady Tongue and Other Tales* has, so far as I know, not yet found a UK publisher. Those who wish to buy the book should know that it can be obtained from Slow Glass Books, GPO Box 2708X, Melbourne VIC 3001, Australia. Go for it, guys.

Avrar Davidson, of course, wrote Agonzo sf long before the term steam-punk came to prominence or anyone identified a technoBaroque sensibility. It's tempting to strain a continuing metaphor and refer to *The Adventures of Doctor Eszterhazy* (Owlswick Press, \$24.50) as a lone wolf, but it's closer to a lone giraffe, or maybe in the language whereby evolution says *can't you take a joke?* it translates as the lone duck-billed platypus.

And some of *Eszterhazy* is a joke — a Kafka and Sherlock Holmes joke, to name but two — and naming only those unlikely two, it is clear that it is

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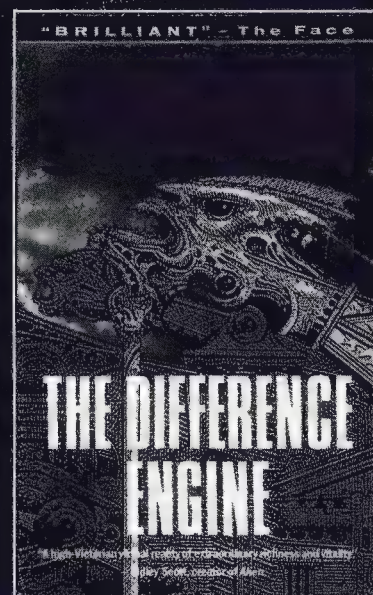
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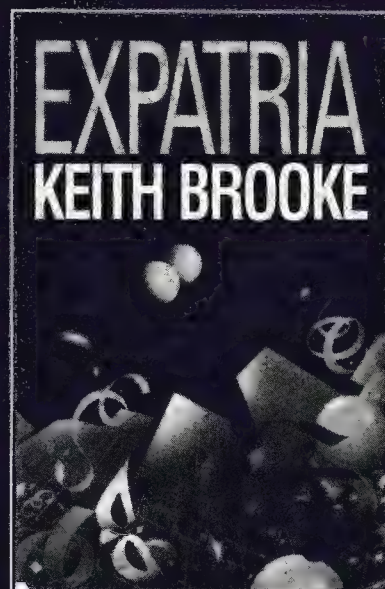
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a 19th-century jape. *Eszterhazy* is what one might term an on-going short story collection with almost enough internal links to qualify it as a fix-up novel. These are tales to do with the affairs of Far-Northwestern Europe, indeed, specifically, to do with Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania (fourth largest empire in Europe; the Turks are fifth, and serve them right); and concentrate on the investigations, as one might call them, of the increasingly-educated aristocrat (seven degrees, sixteen quarterings, or was it the other way about?) Doctor Engelbert Eszterhazy.

Actually, it goes on like that a lot.

I guess you can either not stand it, or it's the best book out this year; it is certainly caviar and should not (even for purposes of review) be read all in one indigestible rich-food chunk. What's it about? It's about a 19th-century Europe that has fallen out of history, but in which there once existed anarchist bombs, witches, sacred groves, steam runabouts, engineers, spiritualists, mermaid descendants of the Lusignan kings...

No. Let Avram Davidson say what is it, since in his afterword he sets out how he came suddenly to see

...“the bulging eyes and bifurcated beard of Ignats-Louis, the fatherly King-Emperor, the teeming streets of the South Ward of Bella, where food sellers hawked stuffed intestine, the fusty blackish-green dress of Emma Katterina, Titular Queen of Carinthia, the urban telegraph system and the trams and the canal and the Little Ister River and the French Gun and the Great Big Bell and the sub-Rabelaisian peasants of Poposhki-Georgiou with their embroidered waistcoats and dung-smeared boots, the Avars of Avar-Ister (Pannonia) and their ever-prickly nationalism, the endless and legend-haunted fens of the Vloxlands, the snuff-shop and the pearl-buttons shop... the very mature goose girls...”

Rich. Very rich. The stories poke sly fun at ethnic minorities, and national stereotypes (Milord Sir Smiht, the English Wizard, being a wonderfully done double-bluff in that respect), and at gender roles, and at religion; but when buckshot scatters this wide and hits so many targets, it would be churlish to complain that its condescension might be offensive to some, when, if you felt generously inclined, it could be considered offensive to all.

Eszterhazy, after all, is no detecting machine; he has, if not an emotional

life of his own, at least a heart to feel for others. And there is (given the times, there must be) a cold wind blowing through these stories; which is the knowledge that however many puzzles are solved to do with the King of Jerusalem, or stray alchemists, or Gothic engineers, nonetheless the oblivion of history is breathing down our necks, and the successor to the pragmatically good-hearted machiavel Ignats-Louis is his huntin', huntin' and more huntin' son; and his man-about-town Woosterish heir; and that before too long, Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania will no longer exist on any map. And we will have the 20th century instead...

Which brings us to Judith Moffat's *The Ragged World: A Novel of the Hefn on Earth* (St Martins Press, \$18.95), a fix-up novel set in the 20th century and slightly beyond; with a curiously old-fashioned feeling for all that its concerns are aliens and AIDS and ecology. Perhaps it's ungenerous to dislike books which have rather poor religious puns in the subtitle, and *The Ragged World* does have a lot to recommend it.

Much of what is here would be, with a different slant, high fantasy, since it concerns “hobs” or dwarfish gnome-like creatures. Since this is sf, their magic is high-tech; and this diminishes what numinosity they might have had — which is not to say that the sheepskin clad hobs inhabiting the Yorkshire Moors in “Ti Whinny Moor Thoo Cums at Last” aren't engagingly down-to-earth and well-drawn.

Where the difference of treatment lies between this and the other story collections can be seen best in “Tiny Tango,” one of the *Asimov's*-published novellas embedded in the novel. Nancy Sandford is HIV-positive, structures her life around it, learns that her life has been so constricted by this — the avoidance of stress being supposed to avoid the triggering into full AIDS — that she might as well have been dead; so takes magnificent risks, loves, breeds melons, and... well, hibernates, and makes a somewhat tidy-minded appearance in the novel's finale.

This heroine of “Tiny Tango” becomes, with the assistance of a DIY plastic penis, a voyeur in men's public toilets the length and breadth of the USA; an endearingly gonzo occurrence that is thematically linked to the achievement of breeding a virus-immune plant with identical male and female sexual characteristics; rather than to, say, transsexual experience or the gay male role in

AIDS. It thus becomes relevant; relevant. One may not, in this tale, laugh at the shapes of death; it becomes a metaphor in a series — breeding melons, raising students, curing AIDS — about continuity. But I don't know whether it's fair to write cosily about AIDS at this juncture. Write sharply, generously, with a sense of black humour, or acceptance, maybe. But cosy?

In terms of purely skiffy plot, the alien Hefn themselves have more alien bosses, the Gafr, who visit earth with a particular plague — instant lack of human fertility — that may or may not be a mixed blessing. The implications of a top-down solution are never really examined too curiously in *The Ragged World*. Some playing with temporal mechanics is done, which ends also cosily; some of the Hefn take on board Earth's ethics about freedom, without necessarily achieving any analysis of the basic situation: that human freedom is freedom to destroy.

If *The Ragged World* is a cat, it is at least a stylish one: a classy Siamese which comes and goes very largely as it pleases, but ultimately does what Siameses do, which is to imitate the voice of a human baby crying from another room. Claws? Sheathed, mostly.

Too early to tell what *The Magic Spectacles* (Morrian Publications, £13.95) might be: at the moment it's cute and furry and probably neotonous. James Blaylock, who in *The Elf in Ship* and other adult novels came as close as Jonathan Carroll's *The Land of Laughs* to giving us the genuine brightly-coloured, plain-shaped fears of childhood, has written his first children's book. Unfortunately, most of the dark edges and sharp fears of the adult books are here polished off, leaving a somewhat heavy-handed moral about psychic reintegration. John and Danny, pre-pubertal boys, find a magic window by way of a goblin-kept curiosity shop; which leads them to a land where the Man in the Moon eats doughnuts and splits his darker selves off into independent entities, while being relentlessly nurtured by an Aunt, a female cook, and a Victorian girl. Blaylock's novels have always featured male adventuring and female nagging, but here it's foregrounded.

Anarchy in *The Magic Spectacles* comes in the form of goblins — not orcs, halflings, kobolds, or whatever the D&D novelists of this world have presently made them, but goblins that frightened us in childhood: threatening, yammering, stone-throwing,

soap-fearing, pinching goblins. They're wonderful. If *The Magic Spectacles* had been written with the strangeness of Rosetti's *Goblin Market*, we might be cooking with gas, but children (that strange mixture of conservatism and anarchism — rather like the readers of science fiction) are the first to detect when they're being given watered-down pap.

The Magic Spectacles does, nonetheless, have in patches the surreal quality that real childhood has, rather than the romanticized small-adult psychology that appears in many children's books. Paradoxically, this may make it better reading for adults. As Sussex and Davidson know, real life is always stranger, always more surreal. How many gonzo science-fiction writers does it take to change a lightbulb? Well, two to hold the giraffe, and...

Blood and Sand Wendy Bradley

First person fantasies, in which we travel the hero trail as "I" rather than "he," are relatively unusual and it is particularly pleasing to find two this month which are well worth an investment. First of all, I recommend Sheila Gilluly's *The Boy from the Burren*, The First Book of the Painter (Headline, £14.95 and £7.99). This is splendidly absorbing stuff. A boy called Aengus is sold by his drunken father to a traveller who is a member of a religious order, the Brotherhood of the Wolf. He is apprenticed to be a painter, but in this world a painter has a particularly significant role in society, both as one who illustrates a storyteller's work with pictures created from poured coloured sands and also as one who may open magical gateways with the pictures he creates in this ephemeral manner.

On his way to his master's home Aengus overhears enough stuff to let us know he is the heir to a kingdom but, unusually for a fantasy story, he is also smart enough to work this out himself and we do not have to wait two hundred pages for him to figure out why everyone is being so careful with his safety. His master is, in fact, his maternal grandfather, and Aengus' gift for painting is the way a bridge will be formed into the world for the four powers — gods — his grandfather Bruchan and his men worship. There is, of course, a villain of the piece, and the villainous Joram

is a fanatical follower of one of the four powers and wants to use Aengus to call up the one rather than the many. I look forward to the sequel with pleasure. There were only two false notes in the piece, the portentous prologue which you can safely skip, and the fact that the lost King Arthur-type hero is called Colin the Mariner. Maybe Colin isn't a naff name in Maine.

Stephen Lawhead's latest, *The Paradise War*, The Song of Albion Book One (Lion, £14.99), is very C. S. Lewis-ish. The main character is called Lewis so I think it is deliberate and, like C. S. Lewis' adult fantasies, this story only really takes off once the hero gets out of this world into Lawhead's vividly realized ancient Celtic kingdom. This Lewis is an Oxford graduate student and expat Yank, and he and the lordly Simon (a student aristo straight out of *Brideshead* via *Greystoke*) go off to Scotland to investigate the mysterious appearance of a real live, dead auroch and manage to stumble severally into the Celtic twilight. Good strong stuff after that and on the whole well worth the outlay, even if the back-in-reality sequences do read as though all Lawhead knows of Britain is the *Perelandra* novels and maybe *Three Men and a Little Lady*. The cover blurb tells me he now lives in Oxford. Maybe he should try to get out and about a bit more.

I am also happy to recommend, if you can get a copy, Gordon R Dickson's *The Dragon Knight* (Tor, \$19.95). I tend to buy Dickson's stuff automatically on the name alone but this is the sequel to *The Dragon and the George* which I seem to have missed along the way and which my friendly neighbourhood bookseller tells me is not in print in the UK. However Dickson as ever writes like a dream and you don't have to have read the first book to enjoy the second. The plot is rather slight — Jim, the 20th-century hero living happily ever after in medieval neverland, is asked to rescue an English prince from a French magician because the rules of magic require the magician to be challenged by someone of a lesser magical rating but who will have a chance of beating him for some other reason — and Dickson manages to convey the medieval mind-set of the characters and the contrast between their mind-set, and that of the 20th-century misfit hero, brilliantly. Magic is an arcane art here which is peculiarly difficult for the medieval mind to practise because it relies on imagination, conceptualization and finally visualization — none of which comes

easily in the society Dickson describes. Jim's 20th-century background enables him to imagine things the other characters cannot and his "spells" are, therefore, wackily brilliant.

I am less enamoured of the other three books I read this month, mainly because each of them seems to need the services of a competent editor. *Dinbig of Khimmur* (Grafton, £14.99) by Philip G. Williamson is pleasing but suffers from being extremely densely packed — it begins with a potted history of two stalemated Empires and their breakup and then is a first person narrative by Dinbig (person) of Khimmur (place), a horny, amoral merchant adventurer and magician. Takes 300 pages to get interesting but volume 2 should be good, if only to see how a dead guy can write his life story!

Steve Harris' *Wulf* (Headline, £14.95) is a chaotic, overstuffed second novel from a British author (of *AdventureLand*). This is horror's equivalent of the country-house murder, the "small town cut off from the world by chainsaw-toting maniacs while everyone goes crazy" genre — when a combination of a mutant strain of BSE ("mad cow" disease — is this the first recorded use in a horror novel?) and a supernaturally infected piece of ground called "God's Teardrop" break free of the restraining hand of Mother Nature and her sidekick, the enigmatic Wulf, to demand blood, death and general mayhem. The town's defenders are Heater Heatley, a 14-year old hooligan, Beetle, the cool biker with a magic well in his garden, and Heater's girlfriend Ember, who is heavily into *Guns and Ammo* and *Soldier of Fortune* and makes, therefore, surprisingly poor use of the razor which slices reality as well as flesh which she becomes attached to later in the story. Early chapters are very heavy going, especially since it is a long time before Harris allows us to know who is who and what is what, but he has a perfectly splendid line with sickmaking details leading to a very "...and then he sliced off his own arm" ending. If you aren't already a vegetarian you will be when you read the BSE stuff!

Stylistically, however, Harris has an unfortunate tendency to end a chapter with a cliffhanger and then immediately undercut that with a "— but meanwhile you should see what was happening over here..." so that the plot lurches sickeningly up and down until I felt as if I'd been riding a rollercoaster after three hot fudge sundaes. With a headache.

Finally I am not sure what to make of Bridget Wood's *Wolfking* (Headline, £14.95), more Celtic twilight stuff of extremely variable quality and not for the weak stomach. A post apocalyptic Ireland is sketchily drawn, a macguffin to give the characters a gateway (through glowing fields) into the distant past and an excuse for poor characterization. Two future lovers go separately into the past and there become involved in the struggle for the throne of Tara through their previous incarnations as its queen and her champion. The novel becomes very vividly written in patches, when dealing with, say, cannibalistic torture, and then lapses into nebulosity once the key scene is past, so that you find yourself spotting the holes in the plot detail, like the character strapped to a torture table one minute and then dragged to safety across the room the next — well, did they take the table with them? Did they have the time to unstrap him? Don't bother to buy this one but look out for the name in future. With a good editor Wood should be bloody good; at the moment she is merely bloody.

Read, and Weep Ken Brown

The flavours of the month seem to be evolution, religion and tribal anthropology. Donald E. McQuinn's *Warrior* (Legend, £14.99), a huge novel, has a bit of each. Centuries after the Bomb, a military genius from a nomadic tribe in what was once the US North West comes across a handful of people awakened from hibernation in the bunker they have been trapped in since the war, determined to rebuild what they think of as civilization. There's a novel of political intrigue in here somewhere, buried in a huge pile of pseudo-mystical stuff. But I found it overlong. Wordy. Hard to read. And full of silly short sentences. Like this.

Evolution is to the fore in *Jurassic Park* by Michael Crichton (Century, £13.99). The plot is hardly original: a mixed bag of characters are plunged into terrible danger, revealing unexpected strengths and weaknesses. They are picked off one by one; most (but not quite all) of the good guys survive. In this case the danger is a safari park filled with genetically engineered dinosaurs, and the horrible deaths involve lots of teeth, screaming, poison, blood and sudden surprises. It's set in the very recent past,

presumably to reinforce the feeling that They are not telling us What is Going On. We are treated to a number of lectures about dinosaurs, evolution and the general futility of science (basically, standing on the shoulders of giants makes us into lazy bastards, and we ought to be made to work harder for our knowledge). It really is well done, gripping scary stuff, and the science is both plausible and fashionable.

And *Eternity* (Grafton, £4.50) by Piers Anthony is volume 7 of "Incarnations of Immortality" and wraps up this series, in which the author indulges his penchant for theogony more than in anything else he's done since *Macroscopic* (1969, and still one of his best). Certain humans are promoted to demigodhood and become the incarnation of archetypal powers — Death, Time, Fate, Nature and so on. God (not the creator but a demiurge sustaining life on Earth) has been lost in contemplation of his own perfection for a couple of centuries, and the other incarnations have to find someone worthy to take on the job. A compromise candidate gets it in a slightly surprising ending. In a long Note at the end Anthony has a few harsh words about critics, and updates the reader on his recent move of house, his working methods and how he deals with letters from readers who mostly seem to be teenage and screwed up. I found this note more interesting than the novel, which, for me, suffers from being written in Anthony's familiar style — its moralizing and mildly silly sexual fantasy do not seem strong enough for the subject.

There's also a lot of religion — not to mention evolution — in *Sin of Origin* by John Barnes (NEL, £3.99). Catholic monks on an alien planet are besieged by the locals whilst waiting for their evacuation. A pair of scientists are captured by the enemy and thrown into a prison-cum-concentration-camp for Christians, where they find out exactly why the natives seemed to accept the gospel when the missionaries first arrived, then turned against them. They survive, and remain on the planet preparing for its acceptance into the galactic society. This book compares with some sf classics: Philip Farmer's *Strange Relations* (each of the three alien species has a very peculiar reproductive biology), James Blish's *A Case of Conscience*, Fred Hoyle's theories of cosmic seeding. *Sin of Origin* is humane, thoughtful, imaginative, suspenseful, firmly in the mainstream of sf and very readable. Twenty-five years ago it would have been ground-

breaking; even now it's better than 19 out of 20 paperbacks you'll find in the shops.

The *Illegal Rebirth of Billy the Kid* by Rebecca Ore (Tor, \$3.95) is a chase story. Sometime in the next century, Billy, or rather an artificial person programmed to be like him, is being used for violent sexual pleasure by his owner. He is allowed to escape and finds himself at large in a post-modern USA — with a brain that is hardwired to reject anything that doesn't fit into the 19th century. Can the powers that be catch whoever built Billy before the builders dispose of the evidence? Of course they can, and there's even a sort of happy ending. I've never understood the fascination of Billy the Kid; as the "Coda" to *Illegal Rebirth* makes clear he wasn't a particularly remarkable person.

Second Contact by Mike Resnick (Legend, £3.99) is also a chase story. A lawyer employed by the Space Service has to defend a captain accused of murdering two of his crew. The only defence the accused man will offer is that the victims were aliens masquerading as humans. Our hero has to find out the whole truth before those who wish to silence him catch up with him. This is a relatively straightforward thriller with a far-fetched sf idea behind it. I liked it, but then I like everything by Mike Resnick. Everything, that is, except *The Red Tape War* by Jack Chalker, George Alec Effinger and Mike Resnick (Tor, \$17.95). This is a version of the parlour game where one person starts a story and introduces as many loose ends as possible before handing the baton to the next person to take over. It's very silly, hilariously funny in not quite enough places, and full of sf in-jokes. It's an above average product of a late-night game in a convention but a novel it isn't. Back to the keyboard, lads.

And now for some retrospectives. The third volume of Orson Scott Card's "Tales of Alvin Maker" has just been published in paperback in this country, accompanied by a reissue of the first two, making that fantasy form most beloved of publishers, a trilogy: *Seventh Son* (Legend, £3.99), *Red Prophet* (£4.50) and *Prentice Alvin* (£4.99).

For those who haven't read them, the first volume tells of the birth and childhood of Alvin Miller, seventh son of a seventh son around the turn of the 19th century in a pioneer community in a North America in which British and French colonies co-exist with a tiny USA. As expect-

ed, he turns out to have strange magic powers, and he needs them. There is something really nasty in the woodshed — the Unmaker, enemy of everything that is. Alvin is helped to control these powers by Lolla-Wossiky, a mad Shawnee who breaks into his room when he is ill, and by (of all people) our very own William Blake, who turns up out of the blue one day and stays for years. The story is a pleasant enough read, occasionally poignant (especially right at the beginning) and frequently funny.

The second volume shifts point of view to Lolla-Wossiky and his warrior brother Ta-Kumsaw (historical figures, better known as Tenskwatawa and Tecumseh). Driven out of his home by the corrupt American Bill Harrison (a future President in real life), he first wanders the wilderness in a mystical dream state until his meeting with Alvin gives meaning to his visions; and then becomes a prophet, preaching non-violence and passive resistance to the whites. The community he founds on the banks of the Tippecanoe is massacred by the settlers after a series of misunderstandings and betrayals, leading to an uneasy peace enforced by one of the most terrible curses I have ever read of in fantasy.

Prentice Alvin isn't quite as successful in my eyes. It's considerably longer and the style vacillates uneasily between the omniscient author and the oral tale of an eye-witness. Alvin is apprenticed to a blacksmith, training his powers till he can become a Maker and build a great city of the spirit in which the reds and the whites can achieve their destiny together. Meanwhile the Unmaker is at work, using slavery and organized religion to ruin men's souls. He doesn't have to try very hard; the keeping of slaves inevitably corrupts. There is also some love interest, handled rather clumsily (but then Alvin is clumsy at love, so that might be the point).

That aside, this is a powerful series, quite unlike anything I have ever read by Card — vigorous, sentimental, with a vast and colourful cast of characters, historical, invented and mythical. There is a working out of guilt here, guilt at the way white American men have treated the Indians, the Blacks and women in general. The second volume is surely the best of the author's works so far published, and the whole thing is well worth reading.

In the late 1960s and early 70s John Brunner turned from standard sf subjects — galactic empires, parallel

worlds, telepathy — and produced a series of large, downbeat novels set in the near future: *Stand on Zanzibar*, *Jagged Orbit*, *The Shockwave Rider* — and *The Sheep Look Up* of 1972, now reissued in paperback (Legend, £4.99). The last-named is set largely in the USA, with brief visits to other parts of the world. There are lots of pages and lots of ideas, put together in a fast, televisual style, cutting narrative with advertisements, screenplays, transcripts of broadcasts and trials, although it makes less use of these cut-and-paste techniques than *Stand on Zanzibar*. These days it might almost be marketed as a "techno-thriller" if it wasn't for the liberal worldview, the dislike of violence and the very, very gloomy ending.

The plot, such as it is, can hardly be summarized; it is really a vehicle for the author to illustrate his future. Various characters, a policewoman, a few doctors, an insurance salesman, a plumber, an Irish army captain, move through a world disintegrating into ecological disaster. Starving people fed with contaminated food are going mad in refugee camps, the entire population of New York comes up with spots, Lewistite drums burst open on Caribbean beaches, you need filter masks in half the cities in the world, mutated earthworms destroy the soil.

It is frightening how well it all stands up. Sf is not prophecy, and it is a futile exercise to read a 20-year old book and tick off what the author got "right" and "wrong," but in this case it is all-but-impossible not to. As I write, three million barrels of oil a day are being burnt in the fires of Kuwait, and the fires won't have been put out by the time you read this.

Finally, a real Golden Oldy. *Against the Fall of Night* by Arthur C. Clarke has been republished in one volume with *Beyond the Fall of Night*, a sequel by Gregory Benford (Gollancz, £14.99). The first novel Clarke wrote (though not the first published) and better known in its expanded form as *The City and the Stars*, it is an apparently simple tale. Alvin (a silly name for a hero, as the author points out in an introduction: I wonder if Card's choice of name for his protagonist was influenced by this story?), the first child born in seven thousand years in the closed city of Diaspar, whose immortal, sexless and rule-bound inhabitants believe it to be the last inhabited place in a desert Earth, escapes to the rural utopia of Lys, then discovers an ancient spaceship and sets off into the Universe to find out why Earth has been isolated from the rest of galactic civilization for so long.

Beyond the Fall of Night is Benford with his tongue in his cheek and his brain switched on — short, explosive and not entirely serious. Some centuries after the action of the Clarke story we follow a woman fleeing from a terrible enemy through an Earth being reseeded with life by Alvin and his compatriots. A pantheist racoon-like being takes her off-planet, riding a gigantic flying tree, and shows her the living wonders of the solar system from inside a vast space-traveling colonial plant, with lectures on evolutionary theory (not to mention anthropology and religion) thrown in. A creditable attempt to follow an over-the-top first act.

In fact, the Clarke is a better read than anything he has written since. The story flags a little in the middle but the images keep it going: from the crowd gathered to see the Last Cloud, via the carved message on the stairs — "There is a better way. Give my greetings to the Keeper of the Records" — through the ruined fortresses of Shalmirane, past the Power Centre where the Master Robots keep their commandment — "No machine may contain any moving parts" — right up to the Mad Mind imprisoned in the Black Star at the edge of the galaxy. Exuberant, fantastic, nostalgic, ridden with teenage resentment and escapist fantasy (obviously nothing to do with spaceships or the future of the universe, but all about getting your own back on boring old grown-ups) this is a true piece of rock-and-roll sf. Read it and weep.

(Ken Brown)

UK Books Received

April 1991

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by *Interzone* during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Anthony, Piers. *Man from Mundania*. "The third part of the delightful Magic of Xanth trilogy." Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-55099-0, 343pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1989.) 2nd May.

Asimov, Isaac. *Robot Visions*. Illustrated by Ralph McQuarrie. Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-05056-X, 383pp, paperback, £5.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1990; a companion volume to the

earlier Robot Dreams, it contains stories and essays on the theme of robotics [a word which Asimov himself invented in 1939].) 9th May.

Asimov, Isaac, and Robert Silverberg. **Nightfall**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-31468-8, 352pp, trade paperback, £7.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1990; reviewed by John Clute in *interzone* 39.) 10th May.

Bannon, Fergus, and others. **The Unusual Genitals Party and Other Stories**. CRM Ltd. [141 St James Rd., Glasgow G4 0NS], no ISBN shown, 36pp, paperbound, £3 + 50p postage. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first edition; contributors include Michael Cobley, Veronica Colin, Elsie M. Donald, etc., all of whom are members of the Glasgow SF Writers' Circle; it's a nicely produced and illustrated A4-size booklet.) April.

Campbell, Ramsey. **The Face That Must Die**. Macdonald, ISBN 0-356-20224-0, 238pp, hardcover, £12.95. (Horror novel, first published in 1979; this is the expanded text, with introduction, appended short story and afterword, which was published as a Futura paperback in 1990.) 16th May.

Card, Orson Scott. **The Folk of the Fringe**. Afterword by Michael Collings. Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-973440-0, 301pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1989; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *interzone* 37.) 16th May.

Card, Orson Scott. **Maps in a Mirror: The Short Fiction of Orson Scott Card**. Century/Legend, ISBN 0-7126-4854-2, 675pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 1990; a massive gathering of many of Card's best-known stories from the late 1970s to the late 1980s; the American edition was briefly noted by John Clute in *interzone* 44.) 9th May.

Card, Orson Scott. **The Worthing Saga**. Century/Legend, ISBN 0-7126-3640-4, 396pp, hardcover, £13.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1989 [?]; a fix-up novel comprising material originally published in the books *Capitol* [1978], *Hot Sleep* [1979] and *The Worthing Chronicle* [1982].) 9th May.

Chalker, Jack L. **Riders of the Winds: Book 2 of Changewinds**. Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-55100-8, 276pp, paperback, £3.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1988.) 2nd May.

Collins, Warwick. **Challenge**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-31651-6, 401pp, paperback, £4.99. (Near-future thriller, first published in 1990; the author is a "defence specialist and yacht designer.") 10th May.

Collins, Warwick. **New World**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-31684-2, 432pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Near-future thriller, first edition; sequel to *Challenge*, set in the year 2002 and concerning "a future beyond the arms race.") 10th May.

Cook, Glen. **The Tower of Fear**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21061-X, 375pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991.) 9th May.

Cook, Robin. **Vital Signs**. Pan, ISBN 0-333-56331-X, hardcover, £14.99. (Medical thriller, on the fringes of sf; first published in the USA, 1991; proof copy received.) 6th June.

Deighton, Len. **SS-GB**. Arrow, ISBN 0-09-985640-9, 402pp, paperback, £4.99.

(Alternative-history novel, about Hitler's conquest of Britain; first published in 1978.) May?

Dick, Philip K. **The Days of Perky Pat: Volume 4, The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick**. Introduction by James Tiptree, Jr. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-20768-6, 494pp, paperback, £5.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1987; see the review of this series by Ken Brown in *interzone* 47.) 9th May.

Duane, Diane. **The Door Into Shadow**. "Volume Two of the epic Tale of the Five." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13662-X, 334pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1983.) 23rd May.

Ferguson, Brad. **A Flag Full of Stars**. "Star Trek 46. The second book in The Lost Years Saga." Titan, ISBN 1-85286-354-4, 241pp, paperback, £3.50. (Shared-universe sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991 [?].) April.

FitzPatrick, Jim. **The Book of Conquests**. Dragon's World/Paper Tiger, ISBN 0-905895-14-2, unpaginated [112pp], trade paperback, £8.95. (Copiously illustrated retelling of Irish Celtic legends; first published in 1978.) 25th April.

Gideon, John. **Greely's Cove**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3591-0, 422pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA [?], 1991; in the copyright statement, the author's real name is given as "Lonn Hoklin.") 16th May.

Holt, Tom. **Flying Dutch**. Macdonald/Orbit, ISBN 0-356-20111-2, 252pp, hardcover, £12.95. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 11th July.

Hughes, Monica. **The Promise**. Mandarin/Mammoth, ISBN 0-7497-0582-5, 157pp, paperback, £2.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in 1989.) Late entry: 7th March publication, received in April.

Jones, Jenny. **The Edge of Vengeance: Volume Two of Flight Over Fire**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0354-7, 305pp, hardcover, £14.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen].) 6th June.

Joyce, Graham. **Dreamside**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-31339-8, 248pp, paperback, £4.50. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a debut novel by a new British writer.) 10th May.

King, Stephen. **The Stand: The Complete and Uncut Edition**. Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-53737-4, 1421pp, paperback, £6.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1978; this "uncut" edition first appeared in 1990.) 2nd May.

Koontz, Dean R. **The Servants of Twilight**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3638-0, 499pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA under the pseudonym "Leigh Nichols," 1984; this is described as "the first British Commonwealth edition under the author's real name.") 16th May.

Launay, Andre. **Seance**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-30273-6, 285pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first edition [?].) 10th May.

Lovegrove, James. **The Hope**. Hodder/Sceptre, ISBN 0-340-55108-9, 232pp, paperback, £4.99. (Allegorical horror novel, first published in 1990; this was the debut book of a new British writer [born 1965] and it received a good deal of praise last year.) 2nd May.

McAuley, Paul J. **Eternal Light**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-04931-6, 384pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf novel, first edition; McAuley's third novel and his magnum opus to date; recommended.) June.

McGrath, Patrick. **Spider**. Viking, ISBN 0-670-83684-2, 221pp, hardcover, £13.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1990; this is the first of McGrath's books we have been sent for review; British-born, he has resided for many years in New York, although this novel is set in London; his earlier books, *Blood and Water* and *Other Tales* [1988] and *The Grotesque* [1989], have gained him a considerable reputation as a subtle, literary horror writer.) April?

Martin, Valerie. **Mary Reilly**. Black Swan, ISBN 0-552-99391-3, 222pp, paperback, £4.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990; a sequel-by-another-hand to Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, it has attracted a good deal of praise, including raves from Margaret Atwood and John Crowley; it was also short-listed for this year's Nebula Award, even though it's scarcely sf.) 23rd May.

Morwood, Peter. **Prince Ivan**. Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-967820-9, 280pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1990.) 16th May.

Peters, Ralph. **The War in 2020**. Octopus/Lime Tree, ISBN 0-413-45281-6, 533pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Near-future thriller, first published in the USA, 1991; the author is "a US Army Foreign Area Officer specializing in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.") 9th May.

Pohl, Frederik. **Narabedla Ltd**. Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-05055-1, 375pp, paperback, £4.50. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1988 reviewed by Paul McAuley in *interzone* 39.) 9th May.

Pollack, Rachel, and Caitlin Matthews, eds. **Tarot Tales**. Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-964980-2, 303pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy anthology, first published in 1989; reviewed by Neil Jones and Neil McIntosh in *interzone* 35.) 16th May.

Pratchett, Terry, and Neil Gaiman. **Good Omens: The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch**. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13703-0, 383pp, paperback, £3.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in 1990; reviewed by John Clute in *interzone* 37.) 23rd May.

Priest, Christopher. **The Quiet Woman**. Sphere/Abacus, ISBN 0-349-10195-7, 286pp, paperback, £4.99. (Borderline sf novel, first published in 1990; reviewed by John Clute in *interzone* 37.) 18th April.

Sheffield, Charles. **Divergence: Book Two of The Heritage Universe**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-04999-5, 281pp, hardcover, £13.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991.) 25th April.

Sheffield, Charles. **Summertime: Book One of The Heritage Universe**. Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-05021-7, 257pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) 25th April.

Silverberg, Robert. **The Face of the Waters**. Grafton, ISBN 0-246-13718-5, 348pp, hardcover, £13.99. (Sf novel, first edition [?].) 9th May.

Silverberg, Robert. **The Second Trip**. Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-04037-8, 185pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1972.) 25th April.

Stephensen-Payne, Phil. **Fred Saberhagen: Berserker Man — A Working Bibliography.** "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader Volume 37." Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-26-2, 9+28pp, paperbound, £1.50. (Author bibliography, first edition.) *Late entry: March publication, received in April.*

Stephensen-Payne, Phil, and Gordon Benson, Jr. Marion Zimmer Bradley: **Mistress of Magic — A Working Bibliography.** "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader Volume 40." Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-25-4, 9+51pp, paperbound, £2.50. (Author bibliography, first edition.) *Late entry: March publication, received in April.*

Swithin, Antony. **The Lords of the Stoney Mountains: The Perilous Quest for Lyonesse, Book Two.** Collins/Fontana, ISBN 0-00-617939-8, 374pp, trade paperback, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) *25th April.*

Verheiden, Mark, with Chris Warner, Ron Randall and others. **Predator, Vol. 1.** Titan, ISBN 1-85286-377-3, unpaginated [88pp], trade paperback, £7.50. (Graphic novel based on the sf movies in the Predator series; first published in the USA, 1990.) *April.*

Vollmann, William T. [The Ice-Shirt]. **Seven Dreams: A Book of North American Landscapes.** Picador, ISBN 0-330-31787-3, 404pp, paperback, £6.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990; reviewed by John Clute in *interzone* 40; as with the hardcover edition, listed here last year, the title *The Ice-Shirt* is given on the cover and spine but not on the title page; confusing.) *10th May.*

Vornholt, John. **Contamination.** "Star Trek—The Next Generation 16." Titan, ISBN 1-85286-359-5, 273pp, paperback, £2.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991 [?].) *Late entry: March publication, received in April.*

Watson, Ian. **Stalin's Teardrops and Other Stories.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-04942-1, 270pp, hardcover, £13.99. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; contains 12 stories, all first published 1988-90 in such magazines and anthologies as *Asimov's*, *Dark Fantasies*, *F&SF*, *Fear* and *interzone*.) *9th May.*

Weis, Margaret. **The Lost King: Star of the Guardians, Volume One.** Bantam, ISBN 0-

553-40274-9, 458pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1990; this appears to be Weis's first solo novel; in a brief introduction her collaborator Tracy Hickman describes the book as "Galactic Fantasy," which is "certainly not science fiction.") *23rd May.*

Wright, T. M. **The Last Vampire.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-04745-3, 221pp, paperback, £3.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1991.) *9th May.*

Wylie, Jonathan. **Dream Weaver.** Corgi, no ISBN shown, 655pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; "Jonathan Wylie" is a pseudonym for Mark and Julia Smith, who were interviewed by Stan Nicholls in *interzone* 43 ["The SF Book Editors, Part Two"]; lately, they have left their editorial jobs at Corgi and taken up full-time writing.) *8th August.*

Overseas Books Received

Anthony, Piers, and Robert E. Margroff. **Chimaera's Copper.** "Volume Three in the Adventures of Kelvin the Rud." Tor, ISBN 0-812-50915-3, 311pp, paperback, \$4.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) *May.*

Bell, Douglas. **Mojo and the Pickle Jar.** Tor, ISBN 0-812-50880-7, 250pp, paperback, \$3.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a debut book, apparently aimed at teenagers, it comes with praise from Terry Pratchett, who describes it as "intelligent, wise and full of heart.") *May.*

Drake, David. **Birds of Prey.** Tor, ISBN 0-812-51356-8, 348pp, paperback, \$3.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1984.) *May.*

Harrison, Harry. **The Technicolor Time Machine.** Tor, ISBN 0-812-51607-9, 250pp, paperback, \$3.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1967.) *May.*

Jordan, Anne Devereaux, ed. **Fires of the Past: Thirteen Contemporary Fantasies About Hometowns.** St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-05433-5, 212pp, hardcover, \$15.95. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; contains mainly new stories on home-

town themes by Edward Bryant, George Alec Effinger, Harlan Ellison, Joe Haldeman, Kit Reed, Robert Silverberg, Connie Willis and others — plus, sticking out from the contents page like an English sore thumb, Ian Watson.) *Late entry: 27th March publication, received in April.*

Jordan, Robert. **Conan the Triumphant.** Tor, ISBN 0-812-51398-3, 314pp, paperback, \$3.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1983; a sequel-by-another-hand to Robert E. Howard's original "Conan" stories, it contains an afterword, aptly titled "Conan the Indestructible," by L. Sprague de Camp.) *May.*

Knight, Damon. **Rule Golden & Double Meaning.** "Tor SF Double No. 34." Tor, ISBN 0-812-51294-4, 188pp, paperback, \$3.95. (Sf collection, first edition; the two novellas date from 1954 and 1953 respectively, and have been reprinted before in other books, but there's a new introduction by the author entitled "Beauty, Stupidity, Injustice, and Science Fiction.") *May.*

Masterton, Graham. **The Burning.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85121-9, 310pp, hardcover, \$18.95. (Horror novel, first edition [?]; we are not sure if this one has appeared in Britain yet; Masterton seems to be one of those authors who is more honoured in America than in this, his native country.) *23rd April.*

Norton, Andre, with P. M. Griffin. **Storms of Victory. Witch World: The Turning.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-93171-9, 432pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Fantasy collection, first edition; consists of two short novels, "Port of Dead Ships" by Norton and "Seakeep" by Griffin; the volume is described on the cover as "the awesome culmination of the great fantasy saga"; paradoxically, the accompanying publicity material refers to it as "The Witch World Chronicles, Volume 1.") *Late entry: 25th March publication, received in April.*

Palmer, Jessica. **Dark Lullaby.** Pocket Books, ISBN 0-671-70309-9, 337pp, paperback, \$4.95. (Horror novel, first edition; a debut book by a new American writer who lives in Britain.) *May.*

Ross, David D. **The Eighth Rank: The Dreamers of the Day, Book Two.** St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-05426-2, 461pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; set in the 21st century, it's described as a "mix of hard science fiction and political thriller.") *17th April.*

WRITE TO INTERZONE

We enjoy receiving feedback from our readers, and we hope to publish a lively letter column in each issue. Please send your comments, opinions, reactions, to the magazine's main editorial address. We may not be able to reply to all letters, but we do read them and may well be influenced by them.

SMALL ADS

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SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY WRITERS' WORKSHOP at the University of Reading (tutor Brian Stableford). Wednesdays 7.30-5.30 p.m., commencing 15 Jan 1992; fee for 10 meetings £23. Further details available from Dept. of Extended Education., The University, London Road, Reading RG1 5AQ.

CRITICAL MONOGRAPHS on and interviews with modern writers: Colin Wilson, Raymond Williams, Brian Aldiss, J. G. Ballard, Henry Williamson, Ray Bradbury, Anthony Burgess, Stephen King, H. P. Lovecraft, Ian Watson and many others. For full catalogue contact: Pauper's Press, 27 Melbourne Road, West Bridgford, Nottingham JG2 5DJ (tel. 0602-815063).

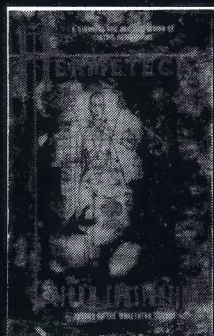
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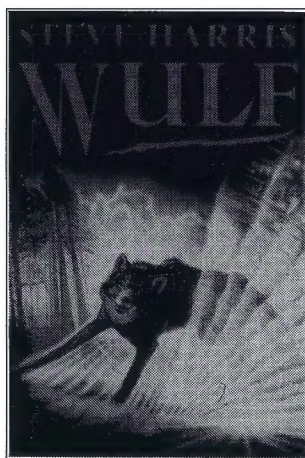
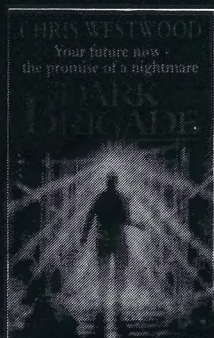
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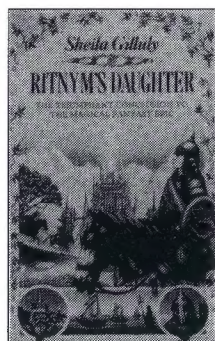
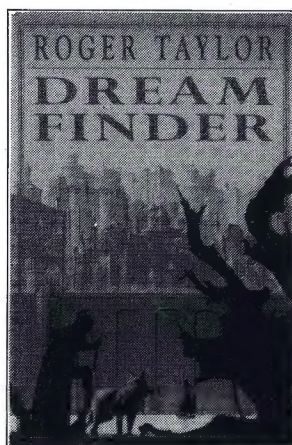
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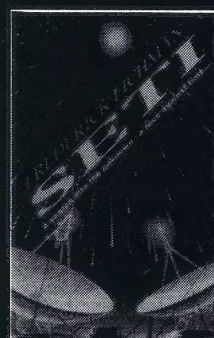
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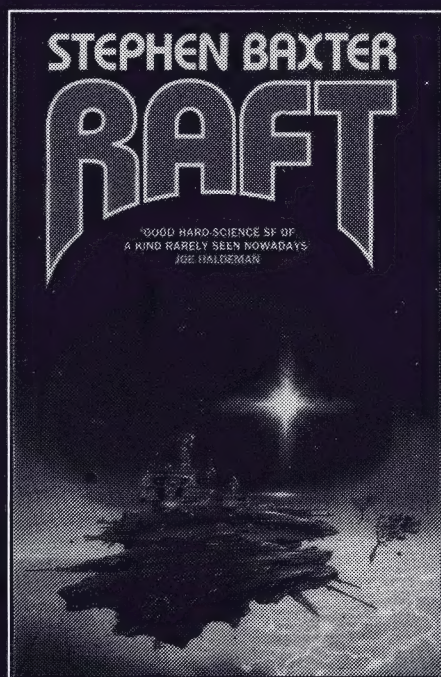


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